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**The Rise of the 'Liminal Briton': Literary and Artistic
Productions of black and Asian Women in the
Midlands**

by

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English and Comparative
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Illustrations



Image: Jayaben Desai proclaiming defiance during the strike at the Grunwick film processing plant in Willesden, north-west London in 1977.

Photograph: Graham Wood/Getty Images

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/20/asian-women-trade-union-grunwick?INTCMP=SRCH>

Illustration: Chapter I: Fictionalising the Midlands, p63

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Declaration

This work has not previously been submitted for any other degree and is not being concurrently submitted for candidature in any degree.

Signed: _____ (Candidate)

Date: 28th April 2011

Abstract

Black and Asians occupy an increasingly prominent position within British society today and London is considered central to the multicultural imagination of Britain. This thesis leans away from the established London-centric discourses and shifts spotlight specifically to the Midlands, which occupies an equivalent, if differently significant status, in terms of its multicultural status. Hegemonic notions of the dominant status of London are thus contested through the peripheral focus.

The project analyses some of the regional expressions of 'Britishness' by women in this region as articulated in literature, film and performing arts. Interdisciplinarity is at the core of this project as it not only engages in a fusion of various disciplines within the Arts, but also invokes disciplinary boundary crossing by forging links with the Social Sciences, Anthropology in particular. In the thesis, I have introduced the concept of the 'Liminal Briton', using the anthropological concept of 'liminality' to characterise the positioning of new generation multi-ethnic Britons in contemporary British society. I argue that the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha's much celebrated notion of 'hybridity' is not adequate in capturing the heterogeneity of new generation multi-ethnic Britons. I therefore propose a perspectival shift to 'liminality' as a more encompassing term to define the condition of these new generation black and Asian individuals, specifically women writers and artists in the Midlands.

Informed by a discussion of migration into the Midlands and analysis of some of the dominant critical discourses in post 1980s Britain in the Introduction, each of the three main chapters focus on a specific genre. Chapter 1 explores how Asian women's agency has been represented in literature and construction of the British Asian subject is manifested in the novels of Ravinder Randhawa and Meera Syal. The 'liminal' spectrum has been used to identify the multiple positioning of the women protagonists in the chosen novels. The focus of Chapter 2 is the genre of short stories where a selection of short stories are analysed from the anthologies *Whispers in the Walls* and *Her Majesty*. All of these stories are literary expressions of new generation black and Asian women in the Midlands and the landscape of the region features strongly in the stories. The chapter also involves a discussion of the crucial role played by regional presses with particular emphasis on Tindal Street Press, an independent regional publisher based in the Midlands. Chapter 3 entails an exploration of artistic expressions of women, focusing on film and performing arts. In this chapter I trace the development of black British film-making in the post 1980s before moving on to a

discussion of Gurinder Chadha's film *Bhaji on the Beach* where 'liminal' Britons recognize their 'liminality'. The 'liminal' space of the theatre is also examined in this chapter along with the development black and Asian women's theatre movements in Britain. The politics of regional artistic productions is investigated through the role of regional playhouses along with the debate on the furore surrounding the staging of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti*. The important and enduring outcome of this regional production is highlighted in this section. The final section of this thesis is the Conclusion which draws together and reinforces the key arguments.

Abbreviations

<i>AWOW</i>	<i>A Wicked Old Woman</i> , Ravinder Randhawa
<i>A&M</i>	<i>Anita and Me</i> , Meera Syal
<i>Life</i>	<i>Life isn't all ha ha hee hee</i> , Meera Syal
<i>WITW</i>	<i>Whispers in the Walls</i> , edited by Yvonne Brissett & Leone Ross
<i>HM</i>	<i>Her Majesty</i> , edited by Emma Hargrave
<i>Bhaji</i>	<i>Bhaji on the Beach</i> , Gurinder Chadha

Introduction: Locating the Midlands

You have to live in London. If you come from the sticks, the colonial sticks, where you really want to live is right on Eros Statue in Piccadilly Circus. You don't want to go and live in someone else's metropolitan sticks. You want to go right to the centre of the hub of the world. You might as well. You have been hearing about that ever since you were one month old. (Hall, 1991:24)

at some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somewhat healed so that we are on both shores at once, and at once see through the serpent and the eagle eyes. (Anzaldúa, 1987)

The quotations above encapsulate the key ideas of this project. Stuart Hall's assertion testifies to the hegemonic notion among diasporic subjects that London is the epicentre 'of the world' and life would remain incomplete in any other metropolitan location. Focus on this particular geographical location reflects the dominant status of London in both postcolonial and black British discourse. What it also points to is the conflation of a 'London' experience with an 'English' or 'British' experience. In this sense London is a synecdoche for Britain, perceived as the acme of empire, global capitalism and world culture. The purpose of this project is to challenge such dominant notions and slippages and explore how the Midlands is an alternative location in Britain which is equally but also differently significant in terms of its multicultural status and articulations of British experience by black and Asian communities.¹ A focus on the peripheral regions enables a critical

¹ I would like to point to the complexity of the usage of the term 'black' at the very outset of this project and its changing significance and usage in relation to the history of Britain. I will be elaborating on the transformations incurred by the terms 'black' and 'Asian' later in the Introduction and the following chapters. However, I would like to highlight that on this occasion, I have used the terms according to their generalised usage, signifying black British and British Asian in contemporary Britain.

assessment of some of the significant claims of multiculturalism in Britain in the post-1980s era.

The much - celebrated quotation from Gloria Anzaldúa postulates a new consciousness among women who occupy multiple positions, straddling two cultures and possessing a plurality of vision. My argument in this project is predicated on the fact that new generation women from multi-ethnic communities in Britain have a similar consciousness and multiplicity but one that can be better defined through the anthropological concept of 'liminality', thereby reading against the grain of popular notions in feminist cultural theory. The project also contests Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' that has gained immense prominence among postcolonial critics in recent years for describing the condition of black and Asian population in Britain. Instead this thesis advocates the use of 'liminality' as a more comprehensive notion to capture the heterogeneity of such individuals.

Black and Asians occupy an increasingly prominent position within British society today and London is considered central to the multicultural imagination of Britain. It is the nucleus from which articulations of black and Asian women's experiences of life in Britain has emanated in the form of literary and artistic productions. In the last two decades, however, a decentred geography of Britain has gained prominence in black British cultural productions, with a number of provincial and suburban settings gaining prominence in the black imaginary. Though not a 'known' or 'typical' setting for black and Asian experience in Britain, the Midlands comprises a significant proportion of multi-ethnic population and there is a pressing need to focus on these other sites of difference beyond the 'hub' of London. The

endeavour of this project is thus to lean away from London and direct spotlight specifically at experiences of multi-ethnic women in the Midlands. The uniqueness of the project lies not simply in exploring the diverse ways in which multi-ethnic women have voiced their understanding of 'Britishness', but in its provision of an insight into multiculturalism from the peripheries; it is a rethinking and re-imagination of the multicultural space of Britain, not one that is London – based, but that is peripheral, provincial and marginalised.

Birmingham is arguably Britain's second city and like London, the Midlands comprise an extensive population of black and Asians in Britain.² Although London has been the 'centre' of the empire, it is the Midlands which has been a key location in which migrants from the 'margins' have established their settlements due to its industrial proliferation. Possessing different histories of migration and conditions of living, this diasporic population are distinct from Londoners and confront different sets of experiences. What this project offers, therefore, is an analysis of some of the regional expressions of 'Britishness' along with the Midlands women's' ideas of home and location, as articulated in literature, film and performing arts. This is an area that has been much neglected by researchers and academics that have tended to follow the narrow parochialist path of London-centric literary and artistic productions by black and Asian women. My intention therefore, is to draw attention to regional expressions from the Midlands which need critical engagement and attention from all quarters – academic

² Birmingham has a population in excess of one million and within that a quarter are estimated to be non-white ethnic groups from diverse countries around the world, especially the Indian subcontinent and the African-Caribbean. (Source: Birmingham City Council) The City Council had also made a bid to make Birmingham the European Capital of Culture in 2008 highlighting its 'culturally diverse' population but the bid unfortunately failed.

scholars, researchers, students, critics, mainstream publishers, booksellers and intellectuals.

Migration into the Midlands

To shift spotlight away from the metropolitan 'centre' of London, it is imperative to gain an understanding of how the history of migration into this region of Britain has shaped the specificities of the Midlands. A combination of factors had led to the migration. While poverty and lack of opportunities for personal advancement in their homelands became an incentive for migrants to seek new avenues, the passing of the Nationality Act of 1948 granting British citizenship to citizens of former British colonies provided added inducement.³ Moreover, a vast majority of labour force was already waiting in readiness to serve their colonial 'Motherland' because colonialism had rendered their economy impoverished and underdeveloped. Conversely, Britain was undergoing a chronic shortage of labour in the aftermath of the wars. This socio – economic situation formed the basis of migrant settlement in this region along with the rest of Britain.

It was not until the post -1945 period, that Birmingham emerged as a crucial economic and industrial hub of the Midlands region which enjoyed close links with both London and a wider set of imperial connections. The presence of 'coloured' migrants was felt in this region carrying with them different traditions, cultures and outlooks. People of African Caribbean

³ The British Nationality Act of 1948 confirmed the legal right of migrants to "enter, settle and work in Britain". (Evans, 1983: 59)The citizens of the Republic of Ireland however, retained the right of unrestricted entry and settlement in Britain and were encouraged to meet the demand for labour in addition to the 'other' colonial subjects. This liberal attitude towards the arrival of European workers contrasted sharply with the fears of social and racial problems expressed in relation to the arrival of the 'coloured' colonial workers.

descent came from Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados among other places. Moreover, “by 1945 there were about 1,000 people from British India living in Birmingham, but numbers grew significantly” claims Grosvenor. (Grosvenor, 2002) These comprised people from India and Pakistan who had recently gained their independence in 1947. Majority of the Indians arrived from the state of Punjab in north India while most of the Pakistanis were from Mirpur in the west of the sub-continent. There was also a proportion of migrants from East Pakistan, from the Sylhet region in particular, working as ‘lascars’ and assisting in the transportation of goods from colonies.⁴ The new Commonwealth immigrants had been encouraged to migrate to the West Midlands through various governmental policies initiated by the availability of employment in engineering and manufacturing fields as well as the need for dissipation of concentration in the potential ghetto areas, the seaport towns of Liverpool and Cardiff. (Grosvenor, 2002)

Jobs for ‘coloured’ migrants in the Midlands were restricted to the unskilled sector or for which white labour was unavailable, mainly in the local metal - bashing industries. Since opportunities for work throughout the country were chiefly located in overcrowded regions, immigrant workers settled in the deprived and decaying areas of big cities like Birmingham and Manchester, and came to occupy some of the worst housing in the country. This problem was further aggravated by exorbitant rents charged by slum landlords and the aversion of white owners to rent or sell their houses to

⁴ East Pakistan was later known as Bangladesh after gaining independence. Lascars were the maritime counterpart of ‘coolie’ labourers from the Indian subcontinent who worked in British-owned ships and travelled around the globe for trade. Most of these ‘lascars’ came from the north-eastern district of Sylhet, which had strong links with Calcutta through the Surma & Kushiara rivers. The ‘lascars’ were recruited by the British Raj in Calcutta and employed on their ships to carry goods back to Britain. Popularly known as a process of ‘chain migration’, this form of migration has been widely documented in many works.

'wogs' and 'nig-nogs'. As a consequence, 'immigrants' became ghettoised and 'locked into decaying areas of the inner city'. An *Evening Star* report issued a: "GHETTO WARNING" forewarning trade unionists that parts of "one of the town's largest housing estates was becoming a 'coloured ghetto'". (*Evening Star*, 1965)

Although by the late 1950s, immigrant workers were economically more acceptable, the shortage of housing made them socially undesirable. In her study, Ceri Peach reflects,

the colour prejudice of landlords and landladies coupled with the shortage of houses made the crowding, and in some cases the overcrowding, of much of the accommodation available to the migrants inevitable and this, in turn increased their image of undesirability. (Peach, 1969)

Consequently, migrants were forced to set up small colonies in the inner city areas of Birmingham such as Aston, Handsworth, Lozells and Balsall Heath. These were locations with poor standards of housing, facing impending redevelopment and consequently property was cheap. Shortage of money was also a key concern for several immigrants. Most migrants wanted to maximise savings in order to send money back home. The housing problem was augmented by language difficulties especially in case of Bangladeshi immigrants. Collectively these issues and lack of knowledge of the housing system resulted in the setting up of 'ghettos' near factories. Peach's definition of a ghetto as 'the geographical expression of complete social rejection' aptly describes the plight of the immigrant black and Asian workers in the Midlands in the middle of the twentieth century. (Peach, 1969)

Investigating the appalling living conditions of coloured workers in the ghettoised districts of Bordesley, Aston and Small Heath in Birmingham, Henry Gunter, reporting for *Caribbean News*, wrote:

[there were] 3 or 4 sharing a small room and paying £1 each a week. They had no bedding or proper facilities; and the furniture consisted of a table and a chair. This was just one example of a condition that generally exists. (Gunter, 1953)

Edgar Edmead, another Caribbean immigrant distinctly recalls his first experience of living in Stechford, Birmingham: “Eight of us slept in one bedroom there on my first night in England. Apart from the very few West Indians, only Polish people and Asians would even talk to you about a room”. (Edmead, 1999: 21) It is shocking that these deplorable conditions mirrored those confronted by the white working class in the mid-nineteenth century as an aftermath of the Industrial Revolution.⁵ The only difference being that now class had been transmuted into race.

Gunter explains the fundamental cause for such overcrowding as being the landlords’ and landladies’ refusal to let vacant rooms to coloured people and charging excessive rents. This claim is endorsed in his *Study of Colour Bar in Birmingham*:

It is estimated that in Birmingham 60% of the landladies and boarding-house keepers refuse to take coloured people into their homes as lodgers. The most recurrent excuse is: “I don’t mind myself, but there is no telling what the other white lodgers or the neighbours might say”. (Gunter, 1954)

⁵ An interesting parallel may be drawn to such dreadful living conditions in a metropolitan city by referring to Frederick Engels’ account of the *Conditions of the Working Class in England* based on his own experiences in 1844. In his book he refers to similar overcrowding by mentioning that “it is nothing unusual to find a man, his wife, four or five children, and, sometimes, both grandparents, all in one single room of ten to twelve square feet, where they eat, sleep, and work.” (Engels, 1892: 62)

In some cases the coloured workers joined forces together to buy their own houses, resulting in acute overcrowding.⁶ Among all of Birmingham's ethnic groups, the Bangladeshis suffered most, with average Bangladeshi households comprising twice as many people as the city average, and their houses lacking in basic amenities. Recognising the draconian conditions facing coloured workers in the city, the Birmingham Trades Council unanimously adopted a resolution on 13th December, 1953:

In view of the appalling conditions which immigrant workers have to live under in Birmingham, and the failure to meet this problem, we ask that the Trades Union Congress demand that the Government provide accommodation for these workers. (*Caribbean News*, 1953)

Predictably, such demand remained unfulfilled. On rare occasions, however, when coloured families opted to settle in the suburban areas of industrial cities, they soon came to be liked and respected as individuals, a fact manifested in the chosen novels in this project.

The 'forced' concentration of immigrants in the deprived and declining regions of the big cities had re-inforced social deprivation in Britain and a natural consequence was racism. It resulted in major eruptions in the race riots of 1958. The riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham coupled with the continuing political debate throughout the 1950s on allowing entry to migrants helped to further politicise the process of immigration. Lord Salisbury used the riots to justify the need for further control on black immigration into Britain, and argue that "he was extremely apprehensive of

⁶ Interestingly, a study carried out in 1971 for the Institute of Race Relations, reported in their magazine 'Race' that "not a single Asian among the residents surveyed in 32 streets in Balsall Heath and Handsworth wanted to move outside Birmingham" and supported this desire through "expressions of contentment". (Drake, 2001: 17)

the economic and social results, for Europeans and African alike". (*The Guardian*, 1958)⁷

Filling gaps and yielding extra profits to the employer, migrant labour was perceived to deprive the white working class of economic opportunities. In the context of certain localities, especially those of London, Birmingham and its surrounding areas, including Wolverhampton, such competition was seen to be creating conditions for future conflict. (Solomos, 1993: 82) Black workers experienced increasing exclusion from equal participation in British society through the development of colour bar in labour and housing markets and thus race discourse displaced class conflict. The coloured workers of Birmingham thus began to manifest their resentment through public meetings and demonstrations.

Unemployment was a key factor affecting 'coloured' workers, and the West Indian, African and South Asian workers were all hard hit by this plague. Redundancy was markedly prevalent among casual employees and employers often used the risk of unemployment among white workers to dismiss 'coloured' workers. The 'colour' prejudice was widespread in the 1950s with the presence of 'No Coloureds' notices in Labour Exchanges.⁸

⁷ Such feeling was formerly echoed in a letter to the then Prime Minister Clement Attlee signed by eleven Labour MPs in 1948, where they wrote that the "influx of coloured people domiciled here is likely to impair the harmony, strength and cohesion of our public and social life and to cause discord and unhappiness among all concerned". (Letter of 22nd June 1948 to the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, signed by 11 Labour MPs two days after the ship, the *Empire Windrush*, had brought 500 Afro-Caribbean migrants to the UK, cited in Carter et al. 1987, p2.)

⁸ The extreme predicament in Birmingham is evident in a newspaper report in *The Times*: "Officials of the TGWU in Birmingham have invited a Colonial Office spokesman, who is a Jamaican, to meet Birmingham Corporation bus workers in an attempt to persuade them to accept coloured workers for platform duties ... The services of coloured men and women had been neglected although there were 860 vacancies for conductors, it is probably the worst case of the colour bar in the country". (*The Times*, 1954)

'Colour Bar' dismissals were quite commonplace in certain industries, as witnessed in the Gongeyre Foundry Works in Tipton, Staffordshire, where twenty-one coloured men were sacked nonchalantly.⁹ Such incidents validate Sivanandan's assertion that "Black labour was inherently 'discriminatable'. It was alien per se – and automatically excluded from integration into a racist white working class". (Sivanandan, 1982: 106) John Rex explains this phenomenon as immigrants being "subject to the same kind of treatment that had formerly been meted out to both themselves and their fellow townspeople and villagers in their places of colonial origin". (Rex, 1970: 108)¹⁰ The plight of the immigrant population remained unaltered even in their colonial 'Motherland'.

A variety of stereotypical images of black people were prevalent in the late fifties and sixties Britain, especially in areas where the riots took place. It was identified that there were:

Three main causes of resentment against coloured inhabitants of the district. They are alleged to do no work and to collect a rich sum from the Assistance Board. They are said to find housing when white residents cannot. And they are charged with all kinds of misbehaviour, especially sexual. (*The Times*, 1958)

It was also alleged that problems were being "caused by 'too many coloured immigrants' in relation to housing, employment and crime" which intensified

⁹ A report claimed that "The sacked men, Indians and Pakistanis, were the only immigrant workers in the firm and had recently organised themselves in the Transport and General Workers Union". (*The Newsletter*, 1967)

¹⁰ This evidence is supported by Rex with an example in *Race Relations in Social Theory* where he states: "What seems to happen is that colour is taken as the indication that a man is only entitled to colonial status, and this means that he has to be placed outside the normal stratification system. The stratification system thus becomes extended to take account of additional social positions marked by a degree of rightlessness not to be found amongst the incorporated workers". (Rex, 1970: 108)

in the aftermath of the 1958 riots.¹¹ (Solomos, 1993: 58) Thus, in the name of institutionalising discrimination against foreign labour, the state had institutionalised racism. This escalated into discrimination against a whole people irrespective of class. The outcome of this is succinctly summarised by Sivanandan: "In trying to banish racism to the gates, it had confirmed it within the city walls". (Sivanandan, 1982: 114)

Within this volatile political climate, impact of the events in Smethwick, Birmingham, in 1964 further assisted in fuelling national debates on the immigration issue. Peter Griffiths, a Conservative candidate claimed to fight the election to defend interests of the local white majority against the 'influx of immigrants' and aroused considerable popular debate and media coverage. (Foot, 1965) A political slogan commonly reiterated during this campaign was 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Labour' and Griffiths later defended the slogan as a 'manifestation of popular feeling' about immigration in the area and saw no reason to condemn those who used it. (Griffiths, 1966: 139) Griffiths' victory in Smethwick was highly significant in the Midlands: it shifted political attitudes in both the Conservative and Labour parties towards a support for strict controls on black immigration into Britain.¹²

In this history of migration and settlement in the Midlands, women have played an integral role. Between 1963 and 1972, nearly 20% of the

¹¹ Hansard, Vol. 596, 1958, cols 1552 – 97 in Solomos, John. *Race and Racism in Britain*, London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1993. p58

¹² The critic Rich opines that "residence in the West Midlands maintained a statistically significant positive relationship with anti-immigrant opinion in both the 1946 and 1966 general elections" and in the late 1950s, the marshalling of anti-immigrant opinions in Birmingham had "important long-term implications for wider national political debate". (Rich, 1994: 176)

workers who came to Britain from Commonwealth countries were women. Disregarding any distinction, they were promptly cast into the stereotypical cluster characterised, as Morokvasic observes, by their role of “dependants, migrants, wives or mothers, unproductive, illiterate, isolated, secluded from the outside world and bearers of many children”. (Ramdin, 1999: 213; Phizacklea, 1983) Even the immigration policy of the time was predicated on the notion that it was women who came over as dependents and men as breadwinners, hence the latter alone were perceived to be a threat or asset to the British economy. However, the myth of this notion is indisputable.¹³ Contrary to popular belief, more women from multi-ethnic communities were employed or were more likely to be seeking employment than white women of the time.¹⁴ The facts undoubtedly disprove the pervasive opinion that immigrant women demonstrated no propensity to enter the labour market. Plagued by disassociation from relatives, alienation from society, loneliness and boredom in their homes, going to work provided these women with an “opportunity to acquire new skills. This economic process ... engender(ed) a...sense of independence” among migrant women. (Foner, 1977: 224) However, it does not dispute the fact that majority of jobs that immigrant women were able to find were in industries afflicted with low pay and

¹³ According to the 1966 census, nearly 74,000 women in Britain who were born in the Caribbean were in paid employment. For Asian women the figure was nearly 40,000. By the time of the 1971 census, almost 171,000 women from New Commonwealth countries had a paid job, amounting to over 50% of all New Commonwealth women in Britain (which included women from such countries as Cyprus, Hong Kong and Malaysia, as well as Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent). (Bhabha,1985)

¹⁴ The 1974 Political and Economic Planning Survey found that as many as 39% of Muslim women had a paid job provided they spoke fairly good English. It was also found that 74% of Afro-Caribbean women and 45% of non-Muslim Asian women were in paid employment compared to only 43% of women from ‘the general population’. (Smith, 1976; Brown, 1984)

dreadful working conditions.¹⁵ Since racial and sexual discrimination was entrenched in all levels of the British society, it prevented 'coloured' women from gaining access to the other, less exploitative jobs. Only those trained as nurses were granted more status.¹⁶ Hence, a policy of double standards was in practice: differential treatment meted out to skilled and unskilled workers and jobs made available in accordance with demands of the state.

Multiculturalism in Britain

The perception of black and Asians in Britain has undergone immense transformation in the latter half of the twentieth century. A major reason for this may be attributed to the celebration of 'multiculturalism' in contemporary Britain. Born in the legacy of British colonialism, the concept of multiculturalism has been a key political strategy in managing cultural diversity and 'race-relations' among the 'ethnic' population within United Kingdom. The liberal view, underpinning this concept, was first expressed in the late 1960s by Roy Jenkins, the Labour Home Secretary, as: "equal opportunities accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance". (Mullard,1982:125) However, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of 'multiculturalism' as used in Britain, it needs to be considered in its wider socio-historical context.

¹⁵ These included the textile industry, large and small, family-based small industries and in certain cases hospitals and canteens, where they worked as cleaners or orderlies.

¹⁶ Samuel Grant recalls his mother's travel documentation of her journey from the Caribbean: "On it there were concise instructions on how to get from the port (Southampton) to London, and then to Birmingham. She told me that it was because she told them that she had trained as a nurse that they treated her quite well. All of her untrained friends had to make their own arrangements to get over here". (Samuel Grant in Edmead, 1999: 21)

The historical context underscoring the concept was the need, following the Second World War, of the major economies in Western Europe to draw upon non-indigenous labour to enhance their workforce. While some societies such as Britain, France and the Netherlands employed labour from former colonies, other countries notably Sweden and West Germany, drew on labour from the Southern countries of Europe. 'Multiculturalism' was, and is a "response to cultural and religious diversity in society" claims Macey, resulting from the recruitment of migrant workers in various countries in the post world-war era following the scarcity of workforce. (Macey, 2009)¹⁷

The legal, political and industrial rights of the migrant workers varied in each country and ranged from a lack of security of residence to denial of right to vote. Germany for example, enforced strict distinctions of citizenship between the *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) and the *Volk* (the people). The 1965 Foreigners Law in West Germany stated:

Foreigners enjoy all basic rights, except the basic rights of freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of movement and freedom of choice of occupation, place of work and place of education and protection from extradition abroad. (S Castles, 1984)

France, on the other hand, operated on an egalitarian policy in relation to immigration and citizenship and encouraged total assimilation. Melotti suggests that Britain was more tolerant of cultural differences and formation of minority ethnic communities by granting full citizenship to the Commonwealth workers through the Nationality Act of 1948 although it was not committed to the equality of membership of the national community. (Melotti, 1997) In Sniderman and Hagendoorn's opinion, Britain and the

¹⁷ Recruitment campaigns in the Caribbean had brought black people into Britain by the 1940s, followed by migrant workers from the Indian subcontinent in the 1950s who were generally employed in skilled or unskilled jobs, especially in industries that were in decline.

Netherlands were the first to make a commitment to 'multiculturalism' in Western Europe, earning them the accolade of "the 'standard-bearers' of European multiculturalism". (Joppke, 2004)

Despite its policy of commitment, one of the key features defining British social policy was the lack of provision for the black and South Asian immigrant workers who had entered the country as a result of post-war recruitment drives in the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent. Such disregard was clearly linked to the assumption that migrant workers would be a temporary feature of the British landscape. It was not until the early 1960s, when the workers began to settle in the UK with their families that it was realized that they were 'here to stay' and 'something had to be done'. (Gilroy, 1987) A number of interventions, defined by Mullan as 'assimilation', 'integration' and 'pluralism', took place to counter the neglect in welfare policy but its outcome was to have long-term consequences for race relations in Britain. (Mullan, 1982)

Unlike the welfare policies, immigration legislations were characterized by an alertness providing increasingly restrictive laws from the early 1960s, limiting the entry of black and Asian people into Britain. With its inception in the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act and supplemented by political discourse, the legislations were marked by a distinct hostility towards African-Caribbean and Asian people. Though apparently consistent, British Government's immigration policy on black and Asian immigration was highly nuanced. Solomos refers to the complexities inherent in the situation reflected in the changing ideologies underpinning government thinking about how to deal with diversity in Britain. (Solomos, 1993)

The shifting ideologies steering social policy and practice in Britain during the 1960s to the 1980s have been based on the rationale of a growing awareness of racial difference and divisions within society as well as the role of state racism. Coupled with this has been the additional pressure on the government to adopt a pluralist or 'multicultural' approach to education and through the latter, dissemination of the ideology to the society as a whole. Macey points out, "This was the beginning of what is today called 'multiculturalism', with the government stating that the school curriculum must take account of the multiracial nature of Britain". (Macey, 2009)¹⁸ At the core of such changing ideology can be found two official inquiries – the Swann Report (1979) examining the educational underachievement of black children in schools and the Scarman Report (1982) investigating the reasons for the urban uprisings and 'race riots' in the 1980s.

However, the ideology of 'multiculturalism' in schools was short-lived as it was scathingly dismissed by anti-racist campaigners as the '3Ss syndrome'¹⁹ and similar sentiments found reflection in the wider society through organised anti-racist movements against deeply entrenched state racism.

It is imperative to mention at this point that during the government's changing policy on 'multiculturalism', there was considerable external influence on the black and Asian population in Britain. The anti-racist struggles were led primarily by young Caribbean activists inspired initially by

¹⁸ Rattansi notes that this form of 'multiculturalism' was "based on the premise that the key issue facing schools is how to create tolerance for black minorities and their cultures in a white nation now characterised by cultural diversity or cultural pluralism". (Rattansi, 1994)

¹⁹ 'Saris, Samosas and Steel Bands' syndrome

the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the Black Power Movement in the US. The anti-apartheid and *Black is Beautiful* campaigns in South Africa were also influential in this respect. In spite of being underpinned by different philosophies and taking place in different contexts, the fundamental aim of the movements was to achieve equality within society and the advancement of black people. While some perceived this as being assimilationist, there were others who saw the movements, particularly the Black Power Movement, as separatist. Britain blindly followed the US lead resulting in the widespread adoption of the self-definition 'black', a 'political' tool aimed at uniting all people oppressed by racism, regardless of their ethnicity, culture or religion. Blackness as a class struggle had transformed into identity politics with community organizations developing in inner city ghettos to impose pressure on the government initially through anti-racist campaigns but subsequently through the claim of the right to be different under the banner of multiculturalism.²⁰

Since its official declaration by Roy Jenkins in 1966, 'multiculturalism', the concept that was once imagined transformed into reality, informing a political rhetoric that was used to define communities rather than recognising its shifts. Due to its ahistoricisation, the concept has been subject to the knife-edge of attack periodically, the outcome of which has been controversial. This has been compounded by the varied definitions of the

²⁰ Emerging out of these socio-political conditions and implementation of multiculturalist policies resulted in money being allocated through councils and each council was seen to be serving their community, thereby promoting diversity. The rationale underscoring such policy was to counter anti-racist sentiments and to enable communities to grow. In the field of arts, this funding provided an opportunity for artists to create 'liminal' spaces for their artistic development and a platform to exhibit their literary and artistic productions. (Bassi, 2007)

term used to serve diverse objectives swayed by the political drivers of the time. (Chouhan, 2008)

In the 1970s, 'multiculturalism' was portrayed positively on the one hand as a challenge to the politics of 'assimilation', enabling a celebration of difference and promoting tolerance, yet on the other hand it also, simultaneously, represented a voyeuristic conception of the exoticism of different cultures leading to the 'saris, steel band and samosas' syndrome.²¹(Ahmad, 2007:187) The 1980s, provided an altered definition of 'multiculturalism', when it was either posited as pluralism, where the emphasis was on co-existence of 'majority' and 'minority' cultures rather than 'integration' or as 'assimilation' where ethnic particularities survive but are subsumed within the mainstream ethnic society. However, the use of such terminology is encumbered with a kind of fixity, and as pointed out by Parekh, is suggestive of a "one-way process in which 'minorities' are to be absorbed into the non-existent homogeneous cultural structure of the 'majority'". (Parekh, 2001)

The splintering of black and Asians from the all-encompassing term 'black'²² following the Rushdie affair of 1988-89, further conspired to question

²¹When the term 'multiculturalism' emerged in 1970s Britain, the initial policy focus was primarily on schooling. Multiculturalism meant the extension of the school, both in terms of curriculum and as an institution, to include features such as 'mothertongue' teaching, black history, Asian dress and – importantly – non-Christian religions and holidays, religious dietary requirements and so on. It was criticized by socialists and anti-racists as not focusing on the real social divisions and causes of inequality, and caricatured as a preoccupation with 'saris, steel bands and samosas' (cf;Modood and May, 2001; Troyna,1987, 1993).

²² It is important to note that the term 'black' was rejected by majority of people from the Indian subcontinent and in Ballard's opinion they were less concerned with fighting racism than in establishing 'ethnic colonies' and reasserting the norms and traditions of their homelands. (Ballard, 1994)Unlike African-Caribbean settlers, South Asians did not consider Britain as their 'motherland' and were focused on protecting their culture against a society

multiculturalism.²³ Acting as a catalyst for growing Muslim fundamentalism, the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) by Salman Rushdie incited Islamist terror and violence on Muslim free-thinkers and critics of Islam. It also prompted division within the term 'Asian' into Muslims and non-Muslims. Homi Bhabha's manifesto on 'Re-inventing Britain' in 1997 also advocated a move away from the "multiculturalist thinking of the eighties", as he argued that it obscures "the hybrid cosmopolitanism of contemporary metropolitan life", a 'hybridity', that is constantly in process and transformation.²⁴ (Bhabha, 1999)

A high-water mark in this ideology was reached in 2000, with the landmark report on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, which claimed that "unless these deep-rooted antagonisms to racial and cultural difference can be defeated in practice as well as symbolically written out of the national story, the idea of a multicultural post-nation remains an empty promise". (Parekh, 2001) The discourse on race in Britain experienced a greater urgency in the aftermath of civil unrest in Burnley, Oldham, and Bradford in 2001, followed by the 9/11 terror attacks (2001) and the 7th July bombings

circumscribed by low moral values. According to Ballard, such separatist orientation facilitating establishment of ethnic enclaves of close-knit people have been highly relevant to the differential trajectories of blacks and Asians in the multicultural enterprise.

²³ The outrage caused among the Muslim population in Britain and across the world in the aftermath of the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie is popularly referred to as the 'Rushdie Affair'. Practising Muslims were offended by several passages in the book where they felt that their religion was violated. Anger, shame and hurt characterised the feelings of many Muslims which were then used by politicians and religious leaders to stimulate unrest and disorder across the country, mainly in the form of riots and book burning episodes. It is interesting to note that part of the reaction against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was fuelled by the fact that being a metropolitan novel, it had ignored the sentiments of the Muslim community in the peripheries. Bringing into prominence the internal tensions of the Muslim community in Britain, it also precipitated the violent riots of Bradford in July 2001.

²⁴ Bhabha opined that multiculturalist thinking of the eighties "sought to revise the homogeneous notion of national culture by emphasizing the national identities of race/class/gender". The limitation of this, lay in placing the problem of identity – (ethnic, class, gender, nationality) at the centre of the discussions.

(2005). It was suggested that “integration was failing *because of multiculturalism*, that there had been too much emphasis on the value of different cultures and not enough on sharing British values”. (Chouhan, 2008) The concept of multiculturalism was also thrown into sharp relief against the background of severe Islamophobia. This was reflected in the CIVITAS report in 2005 entitled ‘The Poverty of Multiculturalism’ where Patrick West argued:

The fruits of 30 years of state-endorsed multiculturalism have increased inter-racial tension and inter-racial sectarianism ... the fact that the London suicide bombers of 7th July and the would-be bombers of 21st July 2005 were born and bred in Britain – and encouraged by the state to be different – illustrates that Hard Multiculturalism has the capacity to be not only divisive but decidedly lethal. (West, 2005)

In such a milieu of extreme antagonism, it is imperative that the concept of multiculturalism is re-imagined. The analysis of the concept exposes a binary opposition: syncretism and assimilation on the one hand and fragmentation on the other, necessitating a new way of thinking about the condition of the multi-ethnic population of Britain, especially those belonging to the British-born generation, and those existing outside the metropolitan ‘centre’.

Key Concepts of the Project

Signification of ‘black’

The term ‘black’ has been used differentially in this project as its complexity denies unproblematic categorisation owing to the transformation it has undergone through the years. It has been historically significant in the post-war Britain following the influx of migrant workers from former British colonies, mainly the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent in the 1950s and

1960s. The use of the term 'black' as an encompassing political term arose in the 1960s to refer to all 'coloured' people from Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent in post-imperial Britain. 'Black' became a racial signifier against whom state racism was directed in order to suppress the proliferating 'alien wedge'. The common political aim of resistance against the hegemonic British racism worked as a uniting force behind the consideration of people from Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin under the umbrella term of 'black'. Despite retaining divisions by language, religion, nationality, and culture, a new politics of solidarity was engendered under these new relations of equivalence.

However, following major interventions by cultural theorists in the 1980s the term 'black' underwent disaggregation into black British and British Asian. Ethnicity was brought into question and ethnic differences between African-Caribbean and Asian communities were highlighted. This marked "end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject" and urged recognition of the "extraordinary diversity of subject positions" and "differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects". (Hall, 1996: 166) The simplistic binaries of a good 'black' subject/ bad 'white' subject and the notion that 'all black people are the same' were negated in favour of a complex way of understanding ethnicity.

This move to a re-appropriation of the term 'black' in the post-1980s era has had a significant impact on the artists of the period and their literary and artistic productions. The problematic nature of this shift in significance is expounded in this project through the setting of some of the pieces in 1960s – 70s Britain and the fictionalisation of the artists' childhood when 'black' was

still used an umbrella 'political' term. As result there is a constant flux in the usage of the term 'black' when referring to the artist located in the post-1980s period when 'black' is a biological rather than a racial signifier and their artistic expression set in the past. I have endeavoured to explicate the differences in significance within the chapters but its complex nature denies any simplistic categorisation.

'Liminality'

In order to provide a fresh perspective on the situation of blacks and Asians within Britain, I would like to argue that the theoretical framework which best supports the complex positioning of the black British and British Asian generation is that of 'liminality'. This anthropological concept was first used by Arnold Van Gennep and later developed by Victor Turner to denote a "time and space betwixt and between". In his book, the *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep uses the term to denote a rupture from normal social conditions "a gap ... where almost anything could happen" or a period of transition usually marked by ritual. (Van Gennep, 1960) Derived from the Latin word meaning 'threshold', 'liminal' emerged as a fundamental concept in anthropology following the translation of Van Gennep's work into English in 1960. For Van Gennep, real and symbolic thresholds are important constituents of a symbolic or ritual experience. In this condition, the individual is located between any fixed points of classification, midpoint between a status sequence. In his study, he refers to a tripartite categorisation of liminality as phases of separation (pre-liminal), transition (liminal) and

reassimilation (post-liminal).²⁵ (Van Gennep,1960) Although dissimilar to its traditional anthropological usage, I believe this concept can be expanded to describe the multiple positioning of the new generation 'black' British subject who occupies a certain category within the 'liminal' spectrum at any given point in time and can shift locations within it.²⁶

The concept of 'liminality' received further impetus in the writings of Victor Turner who refined and expanded on Van Gennep's concept by focusing on the 'liminal' as an interstitial and transitional phase. Turner defines the attributes of 'liminality' as being "necessarily ambiguous" since persons in this condition "slip through the network of classifications". He contends that "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned ... by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial". (Turner, 1969:95) He describes the temporal and spatial location of 'liminality' as an inbetweenness, postulating:

The liminal period is that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the individual is neither what he has been nor what he will be. Characteristic of this liminal period is the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning...²⁷ (Turner,1979)

²⁵ Van Gennep theorizes that at these points the ritual subject is between fixed points of classification, in an ambiguous situation, structurally invisible in terms of society's classification systems.

²⁶The term 'black' is used here as a racial signifier, an encompassing term denoting both blacks and Asians as it was used in the post-war era before the 1980s when it was used to challenge hegemonic racism. However, it underwent disaggregation in the 1980s, separated into black British and British Asian following developments in black British cultural studies. By new generation, I am referring to second and third generation immigrants who are primarily British-born or those who came to Britain at a young age and were raised and educated for the most part in Britain.

²⁷ According to Turner, Liminality is characterised by merging and blurring of distinctions. Person's who find themselves in a liminal phase are "temporarily undefined, beyond normative social structure. This weakens them since they have no rights over others. This also liberates them from structural obligations."(Turner,1982: 27)

A “release from normal constraints” is the very essence of liminality for Turner. Through the stripping down of any structural status, the initiand is an altered person, personified by a liberated intellect and an ambiguity related to disassociation from normative social values.

In the performance of ritual associated with ‘liminality’, which usually functions to preserve or restore order, there is also an accompanying sense of freedom – a break from what Frederick Jackson Turner has called “the bondage of the past”. As a result, Victor Turner argues, “the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements”. (Turner,1974:13) This enables the possibility of a multiplicity of existences reorganising lives according to a series of alternative social arrangements as in case of black British and British Asian individuals in Britain. The anxiety resultant of this condition is often balanced by exhilaration in the freedom it affords, making it an enabling and empowering condition. In fact, this emphasis on freedom as a positive aspect of the role played by ‘liminality’ in regeneration and renewal demonstrates how far Turner has extended Van Gennep’s original conception of ‘Liminality’. Turner thus envisages a broader concept where “Liminality does occasion danger and fear, but it also enables choice and multiplicity”. (Daly,1990: 71)

It is this kind of an in-between position, marked by similar ambiguity, complexity and multiplicity as theorised by Turner, that I contend is the kind of space inhabited by the new generation of black British people thereby marking the emergence of what I would like to introduce as the ‘Liminal Briton’. This kind of multiplicity and in-betweenness is far more

heterogeneous than Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural 'hybridity' which has dominated multicultural discourse in Britain in the recent years and attracted enormous critical engagement. It is my assertion that Bhabha's notion can be perceived to be restrictive in its definition and not suited to the particularity and specificity of the condition of new generation Britons.

Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural 'hybridity' occupies a key position in postcolonial discourse. It is "celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference." (Hoogvelt, 1997:158) In his seminal book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha has outlined the definition of 'hybridity' as cultural contact between the Coloniser and Colonised resulting in translating the identity of the colonised (Other) into something new, an altered subject-position, which he argues is a "third space of enunciation" in which the hybrid subject is "neither the One ... nor the Other ... but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both". (Bhabha, 1994:36) This space becomes a mode of articulation engendering new possibilities.

According to Bhabha, this new subject position negates dominance of the colonizer over the colonised. The hybrid identity therefore challenges the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity and creates a 'third space' where the 'cutting edge of translation and negotiation' occurs.²⁸ Bhabha posits it as an "interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative" space

²⁸ The notion that culture and identity is essential or pure is disputable in postcolonial discourse. Bhabha's hybridity is presented as an alternative/solution to essentialism. Bhabha is aware of the dangers of fixity of identity and culture and thus contends that "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity." (Rutherford, J. 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha' in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990:211)

enabling other positions to emerge along with new forms of cultural meaning and production. His notion of the 'third space' blurs the limitations of any existing boundaries and rejects "primordial unity or fixity". (Bhabha, 1994)

In his conceptualisation of 'hybridity' based on the Lacanian notion of 'lack' and the Derridean idea of 'différance' applied to the colonial context, Bhabha highlights the hybrid nature of colonial power: muscular and incontrovertible on the one hand, yet simultaneously betraying its instabilities and contradictions. (Bhabha, 1995) It is Bhabha's contention that racist stereotypes need to appear fixed in order to be taken as 'true'. However, in reality such stereotypes are often ambivalent and require repeated reinforcements by the colonial power, thereby exposing their insecurities and instability. Such ambivalence and ruptures in discursive power thus become windows of opportunity for the colonized, creating grounds for agency. (p82)

However, for Bhabha agency is only possible with subjection, the native acting in a given discursive context, challenging imperial authority. Predicating his notion on Foucauldian politics of "no relations of power without resistance", Bhabha argues that "there are no relations of power without agency". (Foucault, 1980) Moving beyond the Foucauldian notion of subjection as negative 'resistance', Bhabha proposes a positive, enabling and creative agency, a power "making possible and making trouble, both at once". (Bhabha, 1995)

However, I would like to advocate the use of the anthropological concept of 'liminality' as a more conducive theory since Bhabha's model of 'hybridity' seems inadequate in capturing the complexity of new generation

black and Asian Britons. Despite having parallels with 'liminality', Bhabha's concept is marked by several limitations. As Kraidy suggests, hybridity has developed into a theoretical construct "whose definition is maddeningly elastic, whose analytical value is easily questionable, and whose ideological implications are hotly contested". (Kraidy, 2005) Kraidy points to a model of 'hybridity' that is encumbered with shortcomings and a reliance on Bhabha's construction, as Gunne argues, would be "to advocate an abstract and somewhat limited model". (Gunne, 2010)

The problematic nature of Bhabha's concept is highlighted in his neglect of the historical and material conditions that emerge in colonial discourse analysis and has a significant impact on identity politics. He advocates an agency that "displaces, interrupts and estranges power only from within", omitting the material realm in his analysis of agency. Kapoor notes that Bhabha's "instances of agency are restricted to semiotic transactions (i.e. resistance to imitation, stereotypes, religious conversion), for the most part disregarding material ones". (Kapoor, 2008) Moreover, the differential socio-economic positioning of the contestants is disregarded in his analysis thereby failing to recognise power inequalities inherent in them, as well as the possibility of affecting negotiating abilities.

Benita Parry's critique of Bhabha's theory bears echoes of Kapoor. By referring to the colony-metropolis dialectic, she argues:

To speak then of the metropolis and colony as inhabiting the same inbetween, interstitial ground ignores that this territory was differentially occupied, and that it was a contested space, being the site of coercion and resistance, and not of civil negotiation between evenly placed contenders. (Parry, 2004:69)

Parry challenges the absence of an analysis of the relationship between materiality and agency and exposes the limits material inequality imposes on subaltern 'negotiation'. (Parry, 1996) This also reveals how Bhabha's notion undermines "any attempt at narrative closure or cultural self-constitution on the part of the subject" leaving many crucial questions unanswered. (Kraniauskas, 2000) Moreover, feminist cultural theorists Avtar Brah and Annie Coombes have critiqued Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' for providing an "uncritical celebration of the traces of cultural syncretism which assumes a symbiotic relationship without paying attention to economic, political, and social inequalities". (Coombes, 2000) Such disavowal of inequitable power structure denotes significant drawbacks thereby necessitating a perspectival shift to 'liminality'.

In this regard, Gunne also proposes the idea that "liminality is closer to the model of a dialectics of opposition or contradiction, than hybridity". (Gunne, 2010) Her proposition is based on Isabel Soto's hypothesis of 'liminality' in the series *Studies in Literature and Liminality* as a space which has the "ability to elide two systems, generating thus a third and further system with properties different from those of the adjacent systems that give rise to it". (Soto, 2000:14) The series co-editor Aguirre validates such claims by suggesting the 'liminal' as being "endowed with properties which differ from those pertaining to the 'two' spaces that shape it". (2000:11) Aguirre's views are not predicated on the simplistic notion of the 'third space' as an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" advocated by Bhabha but a far more complex location. (Bhabha, 1994:4) Indeed, Turner too alludes to

the complexity of the 'liminal' space by suggesting that the inbetweenness is really neither, nor *and* yet both. Drawing on cultural symbols he explains:

It is interesting to note how, by the principle of the economy (or parsimony) of symbolic reference, logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, for example by huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs, by lunar symbolism (for the same moon waxes and wanes), by snake symbolism (for the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one), by bear symbolism (for the bear 'dies' in autumn and is 'reborn' in spring), by nakedness (which is at once the mark of a newborn infant and a corpse prepared for burial), and by innumerable other symbolic formations and actions. This coincidence of opposite forces and notions in a single representation characterises the peculiar unity of the *liminal*: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both. (Turner, 1967:99)

This 'peculiar unity' invokes agency and power, traits that elude hybridity. From such a unique location, 'liminal personae' have the capacity to critique oppressive structures and resist limitations imposed on them by social, economic, political and historical factors, aspects disregarded by Bhabha's notion of hybridity. From such a description, I affirm that 'liminality' is a far more inclusive, heterogeneous and complex concept than hybridity and thus provides an alternative to the dominant critical discourse in the British context.

I would like to argue that the adoption of the 'liminal' spectrum can facilitate an understanding of the unique positioning of the black British and British Asian women in Britain. Acting outside the threshold of ordinary structures, 'liminal' entities may occupy the separation, liminal or assimilation phase of the spectrum at any given point in time and glide along the spectrum, highlighting their dynamism, ambiguity and multiplicity. This shifting of spaces does not simply imply fluidity, it evokes deeper significance. By challenging societal classifications, 'liminality' allows for a "scrutinization of the central values or axioms of the cultures in which it

occurs” (Turner, 1969:167) and engenders a “release or catharsis, revitalizing the liminar in his/her community”. (Valerie, 2004) Moving away from the notion of hybridity towards the ‘liminal’ spectrum thus provides a useful analytical tool to explore the multiple meanings that such positioning engenders.

It is imperative to offer an explanation how my conception of ‘Liminality’ extends beyond and differs from the original notions of ‘liminality’ as theorised by Van Gennep and Turner. Although premised on Van Gennep’s notion of a gap ‘where almost anything could happen’ and a period of transition usually marked by ritual, my conception of ‘liminality’ focuses not on the temporal but the spatial aspect of his theory. (Van Gennep, 1960) The location of a ‘liminal’ subject midpoint between a status-sequence is fundamental for me, initiating the model of the ‘liminal spectrum’. Within this spectrum, subjects can not only occupy any category at any given point in time but also enjoy the freedom to move back and forth; their movement is thus not unidirectional. Moreover, both Van Gennep and Turner conceive ‘liminality’ in a ritual context. My conception however, does not envisage ‘liminality’ as tied to any ritual context. The strict nature of the ritual does not afford the freedom of movement that my idea of ‘liminality’ provides. Another aspect where I wish to move beyond the original conception is its temporariness. While I agree with Turner that it is a state of being ‘betwixt and between’, I contend that ‘liminality’ can be a permanent state rather than being simply temporary, especially in case of new generation black and Asian Britons. Application of this erstwhile anthropological theory to the realm of literature and art, as I endeavour to do in this project, enables an

exploration of the uniqueness of the contemporary black and Asian Britons as evidenced in the literary and artistic productions of multi-ethnic women in the Midlands. Although the concept of 'liminality' has been subject to serious interrogation over the years from a range of disciplinary perspectives, especially in the fields of anthropology, sociology, literary theory and cultural studies, it still retains its power as a literary concept as it features as a permanent trait in countless figures in contemporary art and literature.

While I contend in this project that 'liminality' is a more useful way to describe the space occupied by multi-ethnic Britons in contemporary Britain, I believe that this becomes more pronounced in case of women who occupy a 'liminal' location within British society. Different activities of women in different stages of their lives create fluid spaces between home and community, domestic and civic life. While men cannot be considered to be occupying fixed positions in their lives, the traditional performance of multiple roles necessitates women to shift positions more frequently. Thus it could be argued that liminality equips women with a greater critical perception gained from the continuous work of negotiating the complexity of their lives. Thus, the nuances of 'liminal' existence appear more conspicuous in women due to their complex positioning within contemporary British society.

I would like to assert that the kind of 'liminality' that I am thus proposing can be perceived as 'multi-liminality' as there are multiple dimensions to my conception of 'liminality'. The spatial dimension is crucial as I conceive the 'liminal' personae to be enjoying a freedom of movement,

one that is not unidirectional but multi-directional. Such personae are able to move back and forth along the 'liminal spectrum' as necessitated by the kind of position they are occupying at any given point in time. Moreover, my concept of 'multi-liminality' facilitates the multiple existences of multi-ethnic women residing in contemporary Britain, imparting the concept with a gendered dimension. I contend that these women's ability to occupy a series of alternative social positions in order to negotiate the complexity of their everyday lives can be best captured by this kind of 'liminality'. In this respect Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity' confronts a serious shortcoming as Bhabha's theory is largely premised on the coloniser-colonised context and is primarily based on a male model of thinking, using Frantz Fanon as his influence. The role of women is marginal or even insignificant in his conception. In an attempt to move beyond 'hybridity', I argue that the concept of 'liminality' allows for a richer and more nuanced consideration of questions of gender. I have thus endeavoured to foreground this gendered dimension in my analysis of the literary and artistic productions throughout this project as I perceive them through the lens of 'liminality'.

'Multi-liminality' therefore has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. The temporariness of positioning conveyed by the original conception is supplanted by a kind of permanence, a perennality, as evidenced in the unique positioning of the black and Asian 'liminal Britons' that populate contemporary Britain and the literary and artistic creations that I discuss in this project. Most significantly my conception of 'multi-liminality' highlights the regenerative and enabling powers of the 'liminal' positioning, with individuals occupying such a position not simply heterogeneous but

(potentially) more critical, enlightened and optimistic. By reconceptualising the older notion of 'liminality', I intend to impart the concept with a new meaning, characterised by multiplicity and positive associations that can be used for a redefinition of the position occupied by contemporary Britons of multi-ethnic origin.

Women's Worlds

Traditional conceptions of women have been dominated by the idea that 'a woman's place is in the home'. Home was conceived as the centre of the woman's world where she engaged in diverse roles of a wife, mother, daughter, sister, carer, and so on, shifting and juggling positions continually. Over the years, the ideology has persisted along with supplementary roles undertaken by women both within and outside the home. Under conditions of modernization, such as the Industrial Revolution, the ideology of separate spheres for men and women became consolidated in the West, gender differences augmented by structural, personal, social and racial inequalities. Transformations in the role of women have however encouraged resistance against the idea of being defined solely through sexual difference and various feminist movements have been testimony to the rising consciousness.

Black and Asian women too occupy multiple positions to fulfil their role as women but it is my contention that the complexity of their existence in Britain can be best described by a 'liminal' spectrum where they may be envisaged to inhabit a certain phase at a given point in time. Feminist conceptualisation of the complexity of black and Asian women's existence in

Britain seems problematic. While white feminist critics emphasise patriarchal oppression, control by men and domination by capitalist cultural producers on such women, non-white feminists refer to ethnocentrism, the white critics' lack of understanding of racial and class dimensions of the lives of black and Asian women, diversity of their experiences in the diaspora and heterogeneity of the ethnic population as central to an understanding of their existence.²⁹ Contesting stereotypical representations of Asian women as "politically inactive, shy and powerless", some non-white feminists have highlighted the militancy of ethnic women through their organisation of strikes, political and economic struggles and resistance against racism and imperialism both in their native countries and in Britain. (Bhachu, 1993:100) It is ironic that despite such efforts, the cultural values of 'ethnic' women in general and Asian women in particular, continue to be represented as repressive, disavowing the fact that it is the same values, that in reality, they "continuously adapt, choose to accept, reproduce, modify, recreate and elaborate according to the circumstances in which they have been situated". (Bhachu, 1993: 11) In fact, there has hardly been any recognition of black and Asian women as innovators and originators of new cultural forms, blending their own 'ethnic' traditions with local and national cultures in which they are located, actively engaging in cultural frameworks and simultaneously transforming them. It is the absence of such insight and awareness that has been crucial to the neglect of black and Asian literary and cultural production by women in Britain and more so in the peripheries of the devolved nation.

²⁹ Pointed out variously by Brah (1987,1988), Parmar (1984,1988, 1989), Amos & Parmar (1984), Carby (1984), Foster-Carter (1987, 1988) etc.

Writing has been a major field in which women's expressions have taken place in Britain, however, the field of women's writing has undergone immense transformation especially in the last three decades. The burgeoning interest in women's writing in the late 1970s has been assigned by Friedman and Eagleton to "the curious alignment of global claims alongside a politically unsustainable narrowness". (Friedman, 2007:1) They point to the prevalence of an overwhelming sense that globally women's writing was desired, yet suppressed by patriarchal forces, which included women's lack of education, their trouble in getting published and the need for critical engagement with their work. Feminist criticism too has referred to women's writing negatively as "hidden", "silenced" and "absent". Against such a gloomy and pessimistic backdrop, Hélène Cixous' inspirational essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' provided necessary impetus to battle against the negative forces. Encouraging women to break an "arid millennial ground", she urged the 'woman' to "put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement". (Cixous, 1976: 875)

The literature that emerged however was predominantly white middle-class literary production by women in the West as has been the trend since the early decades of the twentieth century. The unifying characteristic within their writing established their difference from men's writing, and produced what Peggy Kamuf succinctly summarises as "writing signed by women". (Kamuf, 1980) In the period following Cixous' intervention, the 1980s fashioned by globalisation and movement of people, goods and services as well as cultural practices, ruptures have been created changing the terrain of women's writing. Race and ethnicity, religion and class, body and sexuality,

nation and colonialism have all come to mediate gender expressions and performances in the new millennium and redesigned contemporary women's writing not just in the West but across the world. Using gender as its focus, such writing highlights complexities of contemporary existence and reveals omissions within debates related to women's identity.

Women's writing in Britain has been shifting in composition, meaning and focus since the latter part of the twentieth century. This is instigated by British women writers who have a complex nationality "inflected by regional, cultural, religious or ethnic identifications, identifications that are simultaneously informed by factors such as gender, class and sexuality". (Parker, 2004:7) 'British' is no longer a singular homogenous category, the writers defined not by their place of birth but by their geographical location in which the writer situates herself. This renders the term 'British woman writer' a complex and problematic concept. British national identity is better imagined as being constructed rather than being shaped by their origin maintains Parker. She suggests that "this allows for a more expansive and subtle conception of 'Britishness', one that does not deny other simultaneous national or ethnic identifications". (Parker, 2004:7) This is evidenced in a number of contemporary British women writers describing themselves either as 'British-based South-Asian writer' as in case of Rukhsana Ahmed or 'British based writer from the West Indies' like the Jamaican born Joan Riley who migrated to Britain with her family at a young age and is based in London. The heterogeneity of these women is thus their defining characteristic necessitating a shift in the conception of the British woman writer.

An expansion of this concept may also be applied to the field of artistic productions by women in Britain. With transformations in the idea of 'Britishness', physical and geographical positioning of the artists has gained precedence over their place of origin. Analogous to the literary scene, women's artistic productions too had suffered enormously before gaining a public platform in the recent years. Women artists have been victims of immense gender bias and sexism in the post-war years. Writing about British women artists in general and specifically about British Bhangra women artists in the 1970s, Dudrah points out that the "plight of women artists might be easily read as perpetual victims with little autonomy to bring about change". According to him, women artists have been marginalised due to the limited social roles ascribed to them and a focus on them as "domesticated social subjects". However, he refers to their challenges and transformed situation by asserting the "emergence of young, fresh and outspoken female talent on the scene which has seen women artists carving out their own niches". (Dudrah, 2002) These women continue to 'make noise' and participate in on-going struggles in the cultural production scene as we progress through the new millennium.

Periodising Cultural Productions

With the changing demography of Britain, the prevalence of black British and British Asian women in the literary and artistic scenes can be witnessed in the last three decades. The 1980s was a defining period for writers and artists from multi-ethnic communities in Britain. Prior to this they

had been categorised under the broad homogenising term 'black', which was coined, as Stuart Hall contends,

as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact different histories, traditions and ethnic identities. (Hall, 1996: 163)

They had been positioned as the unspoken, invisible 'other' of a hegemonic white aesthetic and cultural discourse. The heterogeneity of black and Asian identities was thus ignored in favour of a homogenising sign that was political rather than racial or biological. For Hall however, such a unifying strategy provided a critique against the "representational and discursive spaces of English society". As Hall perceived it, the critique was two-fold – while on the one hand it questioned the "access to the rights to representation of black artists and black cultural workers", on the other it provided a "contestation of the marginality, the stereotypical quality, and the fetishized nature of images of blacks by the counterposition of a 'positive' black imagery" leading to changes in what he calls "relations of representation". (Hall, 1996) Hall's interventions in black British cultural studies thus brought to light concerns about representation and a confrontation of the notion of identity that is no longer a homogeneous concept but is marked by difference and complexity.

All these developments have taken place against the backdrop of a political and economic terrain marked by upheavals and change. The 1980s was a time, when "England was being convulsed by a social, cultural and political counter-revolution" remarks Cowley in an article in *The Observer*. (Cowley, 2009) The decade was heralded by the advent of Thatcherism, with the Tories emerging as the dominant party in Britain in 1979. The "swing to

the Right” as Hall describes it in his influential article, was conspicuous through its “tough industrial and economic strategy in face of the recession” along with “crisis in capital accumulation”. Moreover, the Tories’ move towards “authoritarian populism” opines Hall, “represents a decisive shift in the balance of hegemony, and the National Front has played a ‘walk on’ part in this drama”. Such a shift according to Hall, resulted in “weakening of democratic forms and initiatives” in the eighties. (Hall, 1979:14) Dominated by “Thatcherism”, as the period is popularly referred to following Hall’s article, the miner’s strike of 1984-85 was easily quashed in the North demonstrating the weakened power of the Socialist trades unions. Riding on the success and victory at the Falklands War of 1982, Thatcher was able to gain a second term at the helm of Britain. The influence of the Cold War also governed Britain in the eighties and coloured not just Thatcher’s “attitude to the Soviet Union but her attitude to Europe (especially West Germany), the United States, trade unions in Britain and Britain’s status in the world”. (Vinen, 2009: 9) The political map of the world changed beyond recognition as the Soviet Union reformed during the late 1980s marking an end to Thatcher’s premiership. Upheavals in Britain matched the convulsions happening globally: the Tiananmen Square massacre in China, progress of Chile towards democracy and the open letter by Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia in defiance against authoritarianism among others.

The volatility of the political climate predictably found reflection in the economy of Britain in the 1980s. While privatisation of industries coupled with weakening power of the trades unions advocated a free market economy and stimulated growth on the one hand, unemployment rose on the

other as a consequence of the transformation of industries from public to the private sector. The Thatcherite government's tough policies to tackle inflation at the start of the decade led to severe recession soon after, leading to severe criticism of the government's fiscal policies and demanding change. Mrs. Thatcher, however, was resolute against the reversal of such policies, prompting her defiant comment: "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning!"(Thatcher) The rising unemployment and acute recession also had social repercussions in the form of mounting tension among people and inner city riots widespread across the country, one such episode captured in a film based in Birmingham and discussed within this project. (Vinen, 2009: 10)

Theorising Cultural Productions

The 1980s has been a 'watershed' period in Britain where a number of important reconfigurations have taken place with respect to representation and cultural identity. Being largely a period of protest challenging racist and stereotypical images of black and Asians in Britain through political and cultural media, artists from multi-ethnic communities demanded access to representation. The heterogeneity of non-white experiences compounded by misrepresentation by dominant discourses generated the need for major shifts in black British cultural politics. "Questions of cultural difference, identity, and otherness – in a word ethnicity – have been thrown into the foreground of contestation and debate by numerous shifts and

developments” asserted Julien and Mercer, engendering crucial changes in the black and Asian British literary and cultural scene. (Mercer, 1996: 194)

During this period, writing about emerging new cinema of Afro-Caribbean blacks, Hall discussed the practices of representation and highlighted the need for focus on the position from which an artist speaks or writes, linking identity of the subject who speaks with that of one who is spoken of. He problematises the concept of identity further by pointing to its relation with representation: “We should think, ... of identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” (Hall, 1996: 210) Identity is thus no longer conceptualised as a simple, transparent and fixed notion but a dynamic one that relies on the temporal and spatial positioning or location of the artist and their art. Hall also proposes that ‘cultural identity’ may be viewed in two ways:

The first position defines ‘cultural identity’, in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provides us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting vicissitudes of our actual history.....

There is however, a related but different view of cultural identity, which qualifies ... the first. This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’: or rather – since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’..... Cultural identity in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.Cultural identities ... like everything which is historical,... undergo constant transformation. (Hall, 1996: 211)

While the former idea of cultural identity is akin to popular and hegemonic understanding of national identity in Britain and is exemplified through narratives of English, Welsh and Scottishness, the latter envisions identity as

a historically specific process that does not transcend place and time. It depicts identity as a complex process “in which cultural differences and individual and group narratives of history play crucial roles, encompassing both individual experiences of migration and settlement and colonial history that have shaped Britain’s multi-ethnic present”. (Weedon, 2008: 20) It is cultural identity in this second sense that finds expression in the literary and cultural productions of black and Asian women in contemporary Britain.³⁰

Another feature brought to light by Hall regarding the shift in black cultural politics was the “change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself”.³¹ Hall theorises that “how things are represented” and “regimes of representation in a culture” play a “*constitutive*” role, giving questions of culture and ideology a “formative” place in the “constitution of social and political life”. It is a move towards this sense of representation that he contends is transforming black culture in Britain. According to Hall, this was initiated by the theoretical encounter between black cultural policy and Eurocentric discourses on the one hand, and the “end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” on the other. (Hall, 1996:165) Hall urges recognition of the “extraordinary diversity of subject positions” and “differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects”. (Hall, 1996: 166) He negates the simplistic binaries of a good ‘black’ subject/ bad ‘white’ subject and the notion that ‘all

³⁰ Following on from Halls’ theories, the feminist cultural theorist Avtar Brah too affirms that “culture and identity are inextricably linked concepts” and that identity is “constituted in and through culture”. (Brah, 1996)

³¹ The shift in signification in terms of black artistic production was termed by Kobena Mercer as the ‘burden of representation’.

black people are the same' in favour of a complex way of understanding ethnicity.

These have been significant developments in black British cultural politics that have had serious ramifications on the literary and artistic productions of black and Asian artists in Britain. A major impact has been that it led to the splintering of the term 'black' into black British and British Asian subjects in the United Kingdom since cultural identities of blacks in Britain came to be recognised and perceived as being distinct from those of diverse Asian communities. The 1980s was perceived to be a 'critical decade' as it involved crucial changes in black modes of representation as well as being critically self-conscious about those shifts. (Procter, 2003: 6) As a result of these shifts, writing and other forms of cultural production like film and performance thus became an important site for exploring the places of minorities as well as the articulation of new forms of identity in Britain. It also marked a distinction between the generation of post-war writers and artists and the new generation whose ideas, values, preoccupations and practices no longer remained the same. The political developments of the 1980s also stimulated a tangible shift outward from the monumental geographies of 'tourist' London symbolised by Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square to the 'inner city' locations of Brixton, Southall and Notting Hill, the sites of struggles and resistances by black cultural activists. Correspondingly, in terms of literature, there was a growth of non-metropolitan writing outside London, an opening up of diverse 'provincial' geographies that were suburban and occasionally rural, a key departure from the hegemonic norm.

It is imperative to mention at this point Avtar Brah's theory of the 'politics of location' which proposes that the 'diaspora' encapsulates the relationship between place, history and the present. Focusing on the arrival and settlement of immigrants, she explores "how different groups come to be relationally positioned in a given context" (Brah, 1996: 182) and introduces the concept of 'diaspora space' to denote the terrain in which

multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition. (Brah, 1996: 208)

Brah's concept entails the recognition that this 'diaspora space' is inhabited "not only by those who have migrated and their descendents, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous". (Brah, 1996: 209) Brah argues that both migrants and those living in that certain location are similarly affected and effected by migration and that 'diaspora' is the contemporary condition of multicultural spaces. She also contends that people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds are equally shaped by the diaspora, though not in an identical manner. Focus on the present in Brah's conceptualisation is what makes her theory relevant to the context of black and Asian writers and artists who are descendants of migrants who had once settled in the UK. It also "opens an avenue for considering new identities as they emerge and are articulated in the twenty-first century". (Griffin, 2003: 14)

The impact of developments in black British cultural studies did not fail to affect black and Asian women's literary and cultural productions; in fact it provoked proliferation of such work. In the field of literature, the late 1970s and decade of the 80s saw a move towards the establishment of writers'

workshops for writers from ethnic communities and were mostly organised around class, locality, gender and race. The Asian Women Writers' Workshop for example, was instrumental in the development of new generation British Asian women's writing as it provided "visibility, credibility and access to institutions, publishers and other groups in the community". (Workshop, 1988) A number of women's publishing houses also came into existence such as Women's Press, Virago, Sheba, the Onlywoman Press, Black Womantalk etc. all of whom were committed towards publishing work by black and Asian women writers. These initiatives prompted awareness that there was an audience for such work and a readership who were looking to literature for a depiction of similar experiences of life in Britain with which they could identify.

In the realm of the other arts, film and drama in particular, the recognition that British culture was differentially shaped by black and Asian influences was perhaps felt more strongly than in the literary world. The 80s saw a rise in black and Asian film and theatre activists and the formation of a number of collectives where women artists from ethnic communities played a significant role. In case of Sankofa Film Collective for example, black women featured prominently in the direction and production of their films. In theatre, companies such as Kali Theatre Company, Clean Break, Red Ladder and Tara Arts provide platforms for black and Asian women playwrights and actors to exhibit their work and articulate their experiences of 'Britishness'. Jatinder Verma's Tara Arts was perhaps the first theatre organisation to provide a platform to Asian playwrights and actors to illustrate their talent.

The aim of this project is to focus on the literary and cultural productions of new generation black British and British Asian women from a region of Britain, the Midlands. In the process the thesis draws attention to a series of binary co-ordinates such as black and Asians vs. whites in Britain, women vs. men, the Midlands as opposed to London, 'liminality' against 'hybridity', all of which find exploration in the chosen works.

'Midlandness'

As is evident from the title of the thesis and as reiterated before, the focus of this project lies in the literary and artistic productions of black and Asian women in the Midlands. The region of the Midlands does not abide by any strict spatial definitions but refers to the geographical area in central England framing the West Midlands and its surrounding counties of Warwickshire, Staffordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Herefordshire. Cities of Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Coventry are located in this heart of England, among which Birmingham lays claim to being Britain's second city after London.

A study reveals that among an ethnic population of 4.6 million in Britain, the Midlands houses approximately 1.2 million people from black and Asian communities. (Owen, 2001) This is largely because migrant population entering United Kingdom in the 1950s and 60s had mainly concentrated on settling in the major cities of London and Birmingham along with other industrial towns of Yorkshire, Lancashire and northern peripheries of Britain where there was a growing demand for skilled and unskilled factory labour. This has led to the convergence of people from ethnic communities in certain

regions of Britain more than others. It is estimated that “more than a quarter of the population of Greater London is from minority ethnic groups, while a fifth of the population of the West Midlands ... is from a minority ethnic group”. (Owen, 2001) In such a milieu, the study of a multicultural region from the periphery is able to shed a critical light on the metropolitan ‘centre’ and on concepts of identity, ‘Britishness’ and location.

This project thus contradicts and contests the dominant reading of London as the epicentre of multi-ethnic Britain. It provides a critical engagement with what James Procter has called the ‘devolved’ diasporic cultures in Britain.³² It is my endeavour to highlight “the complex experiences, identifications and insights” of black and Asian writers and artists “from distinctive regions across Britain”, in this case the Midlands, as articulated in their writing and cultural productions. (Fowler, 2008: 82) The regional perspective may be a better way to understand and cast a critical light on the diversity within Britain, something that the London-centric discourses have failed to portray comprehensively due to their narrow parochialism.

Highlighting my endeavour to focus on the spatial aspect of the traditional notions of ‘Liminality’ as conceptualised by Van Gennep and Turner, I believe that the Midlands may also be perceived to be occupying a ‘liminal’ location in terms of its geographic positioning. Stereotypical discourses of the North-South divide within Britain – with the prosperous and thriving South in contrast to the deprived and backward North – renders the

³² James Procter has been involved in an AHRC funded project on ‘Diaspora, Migration and Identity’ and the research proposal was entitled ‘Devolving Diasporas’ (2006).

Midlands in a space 'betwixt and between'. Located in between the dominant and flourishing South and disenfranchised North, the landscape of the Midlands is unmistakeable in its 'liminal' positioning "which is neither this nor that, and yet is both" as theorised by Turner. (Turner, 1967: 99) Furthermore, Turner espouses that the concept of limit within 'liminality' includes a span of related senses, ranging from the physical limit of dividing places and things and extends up to the boundaries between categories and the conceptual framework within a certain culture. Hence, it can be defined either in terms of a 'border' which only divides, or 'threshold' which simultaneously divides and connects; the latter existing only in connection with a 'before' and a 'beyond'. In my conception, I wish to focus not on limit as 'border' but on limit as 'threshold', which both connects and separates, creating a 'third space'. In their series on *Liminality and Literature*, Aguirre refers to such a space as being "endowed with properties which differ from those pertaining to the 'two' spaces that shape it". (Soto, 2000: 11) Viewed from this perspective, while sharing features with the South and North of the British Isles, the Midlands is characterised by its own distinctiveness, which is similar yet different to both. It is characterised by its own unity which makes it distinctive from other regions, especially the metropolitan 'centre' of London. In this context, Mihai Spairosu perceives 'liminality' as "a condition that transcends the agonistic logic of the margin and reconciles the two zones it touches". He argues, "Liminality can both subsume and transcend a dialectic of margin and center" and in doing so "may open up access to new worlds" and "may initiate new worlds". (Spairosu, 1996) Following this view, the in-betweenness characterising the Midlands enables a transcending of the margin-centre

dialectic and imparts fluidity, relieving the Midlands from normative constraints and engendering it with immense possibilities. Such a belief also reinforces my contention that the kind of 'Liminality' I propose is characterised by constant transition, enabling the Midlands to occupy a state of perennial 'Liminality'. The transitional, ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the region is thus brought to the fore highlighting most conspicuously the problems in categorisation.

I have previously introduced the idea that the new generation black and Asian population in Britain are characterised by 'liminal' attributes and it is my argument that these features are more conspicuous in case of women. 'Liminality' lends a complexity to their characters, positioning them in a relationship and power structure that transcends the centre – margin dialectic and presents them with a predicament of double alienation characterised by anxiety and ambiguity.³³ Positioned in a state of constant transition, they are empowered by a critical perspective that enables them perceive everyday realities with a complex and critical lens. Since the Midlands, which can be conceived as a 'liminal' location in itself, comprise a large proportion of such population, it is my contention that the 'liminality' of black and Asian women located in this region is further heightened and intensified. This makes the 'Liminal' Britons in this region unique and select. The literary and cultural productions thus emerging from this space bears an articulation of 'Britishness' which is simultaneously similar yet different from London. The temerity, versatility and multiplicity discernible in these regional works are a reflection of the 'liminal' existence of women artists and writers in the

³³ They are removed from any ordered social reality and no longer belong to the culture of origin nor belong to the new host culture.

Midlands, and demands critical attention which has thus far been highly negligent.

Investigating causes for the lack of popularity and paucity of critical engagement with regional writing from Manchester, Corinne Fowler identifies a number of reasons in her article.³⁴ She indicates to the ‘bias’ of reviewers and the media which is “very much in favour of London”³⁵ as well as the lack of “literary agents and publishers with national distribution networks” which certainly enhances the problem in her opinion. She also points to the fact that the “‘provincial’ label lurks perilously near in marketing publishers’ judgments about potential international markets and there is a strong bias against what David Law terms ‘northernness as a cultural phenomenon’, especially working-class northernness”.³⁶ (Fowler, 2008: 81) Moreover, in their book *Geography and Literature*, W.E.Mallory and P.Simpson-Housley write: “the term regional has so predictably been employed as a term of regulation that serious writers have been less eager to be identified with it”. (Simpson-Housley, 1987: 2) Fowler attests such a notion when she claims that the “corporate publishing industry has continued to erode and undermine what Procter describes as the ‘increasingly diverse, contradictory articulations of *black Britain*’ since the 1980s”. (Fowler, 2008: 82) This is further compounded through the reluctance of literary scholars to engage with regional writing according to her. Like Manchester, a regional location in

³⁴ Fowler has been involved with the Lancaster University AHRC-funded project entitled ‘Moving Manchester: Mediating Marginalities’. It investigates “how the experience of migration has informed creative writing in Greater Manchester since 1960”.

³⁵ Harrington, Mary Anne in a personal email to Fowler quoted in Fowler, Corinne ‘A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black British Writing’ in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 2008, No.43 (3), p80-81

³⁶ Here Northernness is attributed to work emerging from any region north of London.

Britain, Birmingham and the Midlands too has suffered a similar plight due to the very same reasons. The narrow parochialism of literary agents, booksellers and publishers against 'provincial' work and the deficiency of academic interest in such work have led to regional literary expressions being buried under the weight of cultural productions from the mighty 'centre'.

In the sphere of the other arts too, especially performing arts, regional productions are still highly marginalised. Though the cultural milieu has improved significantly in the recent years due to governmental and civil society efforts, it has not always been so. Speaking specifically about her experiences as a South Asian artist in Birmingham in the 1980s, Piali Ray points out that the other arts "were not properly co-ordinated or had any profile beyond the immediate community effort" in the Midlands. (Ray, 2010) Though not entirely a "cultural desert", she asserts that cultural activity in Birmingham "was very minimal" in comparison to London where there were "strong voices" promoting black and Asian arts and culture through various organisations. In contrast to other regions of Britain, Ray claims that "London also enjoyed various visiting artists and performers" from across the globe to perform in large theatres. She explains that the Midlands and other provinces missed out on such opportunities since "there were no appropriate theatres to present" such performances along with the dearth of presenters who had the "sensitivity" to "cater to a regional audience". (Ray, 2010)

In such a milieu of deprivation, change was being initiated in the Midlands by a growing "momentum" and "need for cultural expressions from the community", expressions that were "political, using art as a tool" or for

reasons related to personal enrichment through engagement with culture. Ray recognises that it was “second generation immigrants” who were more confident and were “beginning to find their feet” that triggered artistic expressions from the regions. Being identities engulfed in complexity, their “dilemma, confusion and identity crisis” led to a proliferation of art work, writing, performances and theatre opines Ray. (Ray, 2010) It is an engagement with the various arts by new generation black and Asian women in the Midlands that is at the heart of this project whose achievement have been continuously overshadowed by artistic expressions from London.

Chapters

Lying at the core of this project are three sections – ‘Locating the Midlands’, ‘Anthologising the Midlands’ and ‘The Other Arts of the Midlands’ – flanked at either end by the Introduction and Conclusion. Each of the chapters is built around the debates outlined earlier and introduces a range of texts and artistic endeavours which bear upon this debate. Chapter One ‘Locating the Midlands’ provides discussions of three novels published after the 1980s. The first literary work discussed in this initial chapter is *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) by Ravinder Randhawa. As has been pointed out before, the 1980s was a period of seismic shifts in literary and cultural theory in Britain that had a significant impact on the literary productions of the time. Among the works produced by black and Asian women writers in the eighties, Randhawa’s was significant in three respects. Firstly, Randhawa was the founder of the Asian Women Writers’ Workshop (later renamed Collective), an organisation that was instrumental in the development and

promotion of British Asian women's writing and secondly, the chosen novel is one of the foremost products of the workshop phenomenon which brought ethnic women's writing into prominence in Britain. *A Wicked Old Woman* also brings with it its reputation as "the first *explicitly* Asian British novel" and lays claim for consideration in this project on literary expressions of new generation Britons. (Nasta, 2002: 181) Furthermore, Randhawa's importance in the context of this project is that she is a Midlands child, having grown up in the Warwickshire town of Leamington Spa and through her novel she endeavours to map 'Britishness' through Asian eyes from the peripheries. The Midlandsness of the writer herself is central to her novel.

The second and third novels discussed in the first chapter are by Meera Syal. Like Randhawa, Syal too was a member of the Asian Women Writers' Workshop and has a strong Midlands connection. She grew up in the West Midlands town of Wolverhampton, in the outskirts of Birmingham. Unlike Randhawa, however, Syal has been extremely well known due to her appearances in various media productions. She is perhaps an exception to the 'regional' rule due to her success and fame as a media personality and her debut novel discussed here – *Anita and Me* (1996) – received considerable critical and commercial success. Despite being a highly 'regional' novel, *Anita and Me* received substantial acclaim by winning the Betty Trask Award, something that has eluded other regional literary expressions and hence demanded attention in this project. Being a novel not set in an 'urban' context, *Anita and Me* is unique in its creation of the 'British Asian' subject residing in the fictional world of Tollington. As Procter claims, Syal encourages the readers to "territorialise diasporic cultural production

and pay attention to the regional and economic unevenness of the black *British* landscape". (Procter, 2003: 142) Experiences of Britishness in the peripheries of Britain are narrated through the nine-year old protagonist Meena, the child of immigrant parents Mr. and Mrs. Kumar. Friendship is a major theme in the novel, and plays a key role in the protagonist's endeavour to build a literal and metaphorical bridge across two cultures – British and Asian/Indian.

Syal's following novel, *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (1999), did not receive similar success but was still highly acclaimed in relation to other regional work. Though not set in the Midlands, the novel is located away from the hub of activity in the 'centre' of London, in the suburbs, providing a perspective of new generation British Asian life outside the 'centre'. Moreover, Syal's peripheral upbringing inflects her representation of London, casting her eye away from the fictional Tollington of the Midlands to the migrant ghettos of the East End. Unlike *Anita and Me* which appeared on the literary scene at a moment when readers and critics were thirsting for new voices, Syal's second novel arrived when the urgency had perhaps faded slightly. *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* is constructed around three new generation British Asian women protagonists who explore the possibilities of living differently in the suburban London location of the East End. It is centrally concerned with cultural and generational differences and provides a perspective from 'within' the Asian community on gender relationships that is both interesting and insightful. The East End has been a familiar location in diasporic writing, finding representation through the depiction of Brick Lane in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and more recently in Monica Ali's

novel of the same name *Brick Lane* (2003). Like the peripheries of Britain, the East End provides an interesting perspective for these writers as it exists simultaneously as a provincial and cosmopolitan ghetto. In Ali's novel, the East End also gets represented through the lens of the global periphery of Bangladesh. It is, as it were, a metaphor of the 'margins', both within and outside Britain, a feature that also finds manifestation in Syal's novel although in a different way.

Chapter Two 'Anthologising the Midlands', traces the development of the 'anthology' as a literary form in Britain and is followed by a discussion of selected short stories from two anthologies – *Whispers in the Walls* (2001) and *Her Majesty* (2002). Both products of the new millennium, they comprise writings by black and Asian women writers in the Midlands. While *Whispers in the Walls* is a collection that entails writing by both men and women from ethnic groups in the region, *Her Majesty* is an anthology of exclusively women's literary expressions. The short story as a literary genre gains prominence through these anthologies and appears as a fertile literary form for new and emerging writers. Regional expressions of 'Britishness' are evident through these collections and allude to a 'liminality' within new generation black and Asians that is more profound due to their geographical positioning. The crucial role played by regional presses is also highlighted in this chapter, especially through discussions of Tindal Street Press, the independent regional publishers of the chosen anthologies. The neglect of regional literary work has been mainly associated with the reluctance of mainstream publishers and booksellers to provide a platform for such work and their confined focus on works based in London. The desperate need for

such publishers who endeavour to provide an opportunity for new and emergent black and Asian writers from the regions is highlighted in this chapter. What also emerges as important is the lack of critical engagement with these regional productions by literary critics, academics or researchers, who seem keener to follow popular trends set by mainstream publishers and booksellers.³⁷

Chapter Three, 'The Other Arts of the Midlands' as the title suggests, is a move away from fiction into the realm of the other arts, that is, film, drama and performing arts. The chapter is subdivided into several sections and begins with an analysis of the development of black British films since the 1980s and the impact of black British cultural theories on contemporary artistic productions. The rise in black British film-making and the formation of Collectives by black cinematic activists provided the milieu against which black British film-making developed in Britain.³⁸ The importance of the Midlands in this process ensued through the production of the documentary film *Handsworth Songs* (1986) which went on to have a remarkable influence on both the theory and practice of black British films. The documentary engendered considerable debate among various communities and critics, the latter especially involving writers and theorists such as Hall and Rushdie.

³⁷ The only exception has perhaps been the AHRC Diasporas, Migration and Identities Programme which has recently conducted a series of research projects (2006-2009) on certain British Asian cities comprising large multi-ethnic population. Running concurrently with my personal research, some scholars have examined selected literary and cultural productions in Birmingham from a sociological or historical perspective. They do not focus specifically on gendered articulations of Britishness in the region, nor do they provide a detailed reading of any particular work.

³⁸ It is important to note at this point that the development of collectives for both literature and arts took place simultaneously and may be conceived of as 'liminal' spaces where artists had the freedom to experiment with new techniques and expressions within the confines of a safe, enclosed and supportive environment.

British Asian film-making is another aspect discussed in this chapter. In the post-war years black film-making had been highly marginalised. At that time, 'black' was the umbrella term encompassing both black and Asian cultural productions. However, since the 1980s, following the disaggregation of the term 'black' into black British and British Asian, the field of the 'other arts' underwent a sea-change. Against this backdrop, some British Asian film-makers aspired to move into the mainstream, and the first British-Asian woman film-maker to do so was Gurinder Chadha. Though not from the Midlands herself, Chadha has been brought up in Southall, a suburb of London and thus has experience of living outside the main 'hub of the world'. Co-scripted by Meera Syal and Chadha herself, the film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) has been highly acclaimed and its characters have a strong Midlands connection. All residents of Birmingham, the dramatis personae are multi-generational women who venture on a day out to the sea-side resort of Blackpool for a 'female fun-time!'. The uniqueness of the film lies in its marginalisation of the white world in favour of an exploration of gender and generational conflicts 'within' the Asian community and describes the predicament of the women from a feminist perspective.

Theatre and performing arts is the focus of the final section of the third chapter and developments in the black and Asian women's theatre movements and advancement of women playwrights in Britain occupies a key position within it. Tamasha and Talawa have been vital theatre organisations creating opportunities for the writing and production of new plays by women from black and Asian communities along with an aim to cater to culturally diverse audiences. The centre for such cultural productions

and activity has customarily been London although recently some companies have initiated devolving production to regional theatres. The growth of regional playhouses as a consequence of shifts in governmental policy coupled with the establishment of regional repertory theatres have engendered significant transformation in the black British theatre scene and facilitated the expansion of theatre movements to the peripheries of Britain. Aided by considerable funding from the Arts Council of England, regional theatres have played a major role in the dissemination of power to regional playhouses and exploration of talent from the regions. In the context of the Midlands, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre is the foremost centre for development of new generation black and Asian women playwrights and Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's internship is a testament to the fact. What is also relevant to this context is the furore that emerged following the staging of Bhatti's play *Behzti* (2004) which had catastrophic consequences locally and an enduring outcome nationally. The violence ensuing from the staging of the play and the consequent cancellation of subsequent performances has been the subject of immense debate on issues of censorship and artistic licence. A discussion of such a historic occasion in black British theatre cannot be overlooked in a project on arts in the Midlands. It also brings into focus that the resistance through artistic forms that had found small beginnings in the writing, film and theatre collectives in the 1980s had ultimately culminated in an audacious and provocative outburst that had the temerity to 'shatter the walls of the aviary'. This section also entails a discussion on some of the key arts organisations located in the Midlands and the multifarious roles played by them in promoting and developing regional artistic productions especially

by multi-ethnic artists. Their sustenance is at the mercy of funding from the Arts Council of England and local authorities as well as the benevolence of generous donors, all of which is jeopardised by the current spending cuts recently announced by the Coalition government. Though not specifically targeted at black and Asian women's artistic endeavours, these organisations provide essential support to art from regional ethnic communities and certain projects are women-led or focus on women.

The Conclusion suggests that it would be a fallacy to equate 'Black experience' and 'British Experience' with a 'London Experience'. Significant population of black and Asians reside in the Midlands and their experiences of 'inner city' Birmingham or suburban Midlands differs from London, the 'centre' and 'hub of the world', not just geographically, but historically, culturally and experientially. In fact, being positioned in the geographical region of the Midlands, a 'liminal' location in itself, the 'liminality' within these new generation 'Liminal Britons' is far more intense; their distinctiveness perceptible in their literary and artistic productions. It closes with a discussion on the persistent disregard of regional literary and artistic production from publishers and academics as well as the transformations brought about in the arts scene as a consequence of the Coalition government's Comprehensive Spending Review. In the absence of appropriate funding, it is the responsibility of the mainstream publishing and academic fraternities to support and sustain regional expressions of 'Britishness' which will become further marginalised by not standing at the 'hub of hype' and prove to be a great artistic loss for the nation.

The Methodology

The interdisciplinary nature of this project has necessitated a methodology that involves a varied approach, drawing from a number of fields and disciplines. Before launching on an exploration of the literary and artistic production by women in the Midlands, it was necessary to underscore the background against which this work has been produced. Archival research was a useful tool to unearth and explore the specific history of migration into the Midlands. Although literature review indicated the presence of information on migration into the UK, not much related explicitly to migration into Birmingham or the Midlands. Validation of available information and further details about the migrants in the Midlands could only be obtained through archival work at the Birmingham Central Library Archives.

Following that, perhaps the most important aspect has been literary criticism. Although there has been a paucity of critical appraisal due to the neglect of regional work, some texts have been subjects of intense study and debates by established literary critics and academics. Moreover, modern literary criticism is informed by literary theory and it has been important to gain knowledge and understanding of the key theoretical frameworks underpinning the chosen literary and artistic productions in all three chapters of this thesis. Since the initial chapters are based on literary expressions, it has been essential to obtain an understanding of the literary theories that have been influential in framing the ideas, form and content articulated in the relevant novels and short stories. The heterogeneity of the texts renders

them difficult to be neatly categorised simply as black British texts or women's writing, and it is the interventions by various theorists that play a role in shaping the significance and meaning that a text attains at any given point in time. Thus the first two chapters appear in conversation with postcolonial theory, black British cultural studies and feminist literary theory. Writings by Bhabha, Hall, Gilroy, Arana, Boyce-Davies, Brah, Anzaldúa *et al* have all been crucial interventions in theoretical frameworks related to British literary and cultural studies and require examination through readings of the chosen fiction and cultural productions in this project.

Black British cultural theory does not simply relate to literature but permeates the other arts as well. Film and theatre forms a significant part of the artistic productions by black and Asian women in the Midlands, and have been crucially influenced by the interventions in black British cultural theory. Apart from Hall's seminal essay 'New Ethnicities' with focus on 'difference' and the 'politics of representation', Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien's critical discourse on '*black representation*' have had a profound impact on the theories in this field and have required attention in this project. Moreover, theories on 'intercultural' theatre and 'world' theatre have had an impression on black and Asian women's artistic productions in Britain, an influence that cannot be ignored.

By suggesting links with anthropology, this study crosses disciplinary boundaries. At the heart of this project lies the anthropological concept of 'liminality' postulated by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner. Though reconceptualised to correspond to the contemporary context, the concept of 'liminality' informs my reading and discussions of the material and cultural

coordinates of the Midlands throughout this project. Permeating the thesis in numerous ways, this anthropological theory challenges popular notions like that of Bhabha's 'hybridity', and enables a redefinition and re-imagination of the space and condition of new generation black and Asian Britons. Turner's concept of the 'ritual' can be evidenced in these women's performances and is central to the argument underpinning this project. Crossing the 'threshold' through the performance of a ritual is significant for Turner as it enables an individual to step outside normal societal constraints into a 'liminal' space where 'almost anything can happen'. It is occupation of such a space engendering multiple possibilities is what I propose to be the condition of new generation black and Asian Britons in contemporary Britain in general and the Midlands in particular.

Interviews have been a vital source of information in this project in the absence of much critical literature and archival material in certain areas. As mentioned before there has been little critical engagement with regional literary productions and the chosen anthologies have not been critically appraised apart from local newspaper reports. Moreover, the crucial role played by regional publishers is not widely documented. The dearth of such information has therefore necessitated the use of interviews with writers, artists etc. for gathering relevant information. Even in the field of arts, discourses related to the development of artistic productions in the Midlands have been very limited. The focus of most literature on artistic development in Britain has been London-centric revealing a severe deficiency in peripheral focus. Thus, information on the development of regional arts could only be

obtained through interviews and from organisational websites, making them useful resources for research.

Being an interdisciplinary project, this thesis also incorporates literary and artistic productions that are both fiction and non-fiction based. While the initial chapters involve discussion on fiction in different genres, namely, novel and the short story, the third chapter is on the other arts, mainly premised on non-fiction as it focuses on documentary films, theatre and arts organisations and their respective projects. Historical analysis of migration into the Midlands has also been a key non-fictional resource forming the foundation on which discussion on the chosen works are predicated. Newspaper reports and journal articles related to the furore and consequent debates over Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* have been instrumental in providing information from various perspectives. These non-fiction sources have been a crucial resource in the absence of critical literature.

Dominant influences on Black British Literary and Cultural Productions

The principal influences in this project have been Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's theory of 'liminality' as expounded in their books *The Rites of Passage* (1960) and *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1969) respectively. These works have provided the underpinning concept of this project and it is on the basis of which I am proposing the notion of the 'Liminal Briton'. Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' presented in his influential book, *The Location of Culture* (1994) has also been fundamental in framing arguments for 'liminality' as a more inclusive concept

and enabling a critique of 'hybridity'. Major arguments in the project have also been premised on Stuart Hall's cultural theories as illustrated in a number of important essays appearing in the collection *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (1996), especially his essay entitled 'New Ethnicities'.

Ceri Peach's study on the socio-economic conditions of migrant settlements in Britain, *West Indian Migration to Britain: a Social Geography* (1969) along with A. Sivanandan's *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* (1982) on working conditions of migrant population have been key influences on this assignment. Susheila Nasta's *Home Truths: Fictions of South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (2002) has been significant resource for studying the development of British Asian fiction and forms a basis for textual analysis. James Procter's *Dwelling Places: Postwar black British Writing* (2003) and Mark Stein's *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004) are seminal texts providing insight into the theme of the 'politics of location' exemplified in Black British fiction. Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996) has been an important text in theories of identity and difference, especially the construction of British Asian identity in Britain.

ICA Documents No.7, Black Film, British Cinema (1988) is also a prominent text in relation to black British cultural productions and the essays in the collection have had a profound impact on this project. Essays by Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer have been especially influential in this respect as well as the Hall – Rushdie debate. Gabriele Griffin's exhaustive study

Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights (2003) has provided a strong foundation on which the section on black and Asian theatre has been premised. However, the last but not the least influence has been Corrine Fowler's study on the devolved approach to black British literature in 'A Tale of Two Novels: A Devolved Approach to Black British Writing' (2008) as part of the 'Moving Manchester' project undertaken by Lancaster University. As has been pointed out before, there is an absence of critical engagement with regional literary and cultural productions, and it is primarily Fowler's study that has attempted to correct this problem. This thesis is a similar endeavour – to highlight the literary and artistic productions of black and Asian women in the Midlands region of Britain - and challenge the narrow parochialism of a London-centric discourse by casting a critical glance from the periphery.

Chapter I: Fictionalising the Midlands



One sweltering summer afternoon in August 1976, Jayaben Desai decided she wasn't going to take it anymore. Desai, who had arrived from India eight years earlier, was working in the dispatch department of the Grunwick film processing plant in Willesden, London. The workforce was predominantly made up of Asian women, some of whom were unhappy with their working conditions.

Desai said she walked out after her son claimed unfair dismissal by the company and she had been told she had to work overtime. Her parting words to the manager were: "What you are running here is not a factory, it is a zoo. In a zoo, there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys who dance on your fingertips, others are lions who can bite your head off. We are those lions, Mr Manager."

Three days later, workers at the Grunwick plant went on strike for the right to be represented by a trade union. The media dubbed them "strikers in saris".

(Manzoor, 2010)

Jayaben Desai's defiant stance during the industrial strike at the Grunwick Photoprocessing plant in 1977 was a landmark event as it marked the first occasion when Asian women's agency and resistance was witnessed in public in Britain.³⁹ At Grunwick, where mostly Asian women were employed,

³⁹ The Grunwick strike began in 1976, with more than 130 workers picketing at the factory protesting against appalling working conditions and demanding union recognition. Despite hailing from respectable families and being educated in India, these women had been forced to take up menial and manual jobs in factories in Britain and the disconnection between their past lives in the colonies and that in Britain drove them towards activism.

there was a remarkable display of courage and strength by the factory workers led by Desai who challenged and rejected the stereotypical notions of Asian women being silent and submissive victims. Ruth Pearson⁴⁰ points out: “At the time, the general view of these women was that they were downtrodden, second-class people, often depicted as nothing more than passive victims”. (Manzoor, 2010) Popular perceptions were dominated by the idea that Asian women were subjugated, confined to the ‘domestic’ sphere and marked by stoicism against patriarchal oppression and institutional racism. As evidenced in the photograph, despite not being ‘westernised’ in any sense, the sari-clad striking women contested such stereotypical portrayals of women and exhibited incredible resistance against hegemonic white patriarchy. As Wilson notes, it “has proved for always that Asian women workers can be strong, resourceful and courageous, that they can stand up; face the world and demand their rights.” (Wilson, 1978)

The defiance of these women strikers has also disproved the myth that Asian women were merely leading ‘domesticated lives’. Immigrant women had sought employment soon after their arrival in Britain and were active in the ‘public’ sphere of work. Many Asian women chose to work at factories and Jayaben Desai was a testament to this fact. She had gained employment at the Grunwick Photo Processing Plant in the seventies where dispute arose over pay and poor working conditions. In the absence of any

⁴⁰ Ruth Pearson, the Professor of Development Studies at the University of Leeds was the main organiser of the exhibition celebrating the role of South Asian women at the Grunwick dispute. The exhibition ‘Striking Women: Voices of South Asian Workers from Grunwick and Gate Gourmet’ was held at the Women’s Library in London from January – March 2010.

support to defend the interests of these women workers, they initiated a strike. Manzoor writes:

Asian women workers found that they were combating not only white male employers but also struggling against white male trade union leaders. The reason Grunwick remains so historically potent is that it marked the first time that the trade union movement gave real support to Asian employees. (Manzoor, 2010)

The extraordinary resistance and belligerent attitude displayed by these women strikers spearheaded by Desai makes this episode crucial in terms of Asian women's role as active agents against patriarchal domination in Britain and marks their position in trade union history. The image of the traditional sari-clad Desai flaunting a placard against the backdrop of the factory not only challenges the stereotypical representation of Asian women but proves that they could win battles that were inconceivable to have even been fought in the earlier decades. A contestation of such stereotypical representation of Asian women forms the contextual background to the literary works discussed in this chapter.

Analogous to Asian women's activity in the political sphere, their agency also found representation in literary productions. Literary representations of strong and courageous South Asian women in Britain were first brought to the forefront by literary expressions generated through the workshop phenomenon led by Ravinder Randhawa as outlined in the Introduction. This chapter focuses on women's literary productions that contest the conventional representations of Asian women in Britain: Ravinder Randhawa's novel *A Wicked Old Woman* (1994); Meera Syal's Betty Trask Award winning novel *Anita and Me* (1997), set in the Midlands, as a literary representation of the historical milieu in Britain; and her following novel *Life*

isn't all ha ha hee hee (2000). All three novels demonstrate how the construction of a British Asian figure, alongside the historical development of immigration, negotiates their existence in Britain against the “backdrop of racial diversity and cultural hybridity”. (Dunphy, 2004)

Salman Rushdie postulates that being a black or Asian in a predominantly white society imposes on many writers a kind of “public responsibility, a kind of public project, which may be described as “giving a voice”.⁴¹ (Rushdie, 1988: 37) He then goes on to qualify that by mentioning two subdivisions within this kind of writing, namely, one which is “anthemic” where the writer sings songs or narrates stories about what they find pleasing and what they know to be true. The other kind of “giving a voice” that he addresses, is one which is aimed more directly at the white community and is an attempt to traverse the chasm existing between the black and white perceptions of the world. Part of this project of “giving a voice” in his opinion, is to speak on behalf of the great masses that have been deprived of an opportunity to discuss issues candidly and hence comprises literature of great value and importance. Consequently, what appears as a recurrent theme in much of the writing by these British Asian authors is what Felicity Hand describes as “a concern with achieving a balance between the dictates of the society in which they live and the dictates of their Asian heritage”. (Hand, 1994) Using the transcultural experience as a valuable tool, such writing therefore serves a dual purpose as argued by Davis:

⁴¹ This is an edited version of an opening speech given by Salman Rushdie at a conference held at Kungliga Svenska Vitterhedsakademien in Stockholm in October 1986.

It is part of the process of the invalidation of the orientalist stereotypes that prevail in the Western consciousness (characterised by mysterious customs and traditions) and it contributes to the dismantling of the British myth (the typical Briton as the polite English gentleman, etc) 'by describing the reality of their community amidst an unknown England of violence and insolidarity'. (Davis, 1999)

A clear manifestation of the inversion of Orientalist stereotypes is found in all three novels which not simply provide representations of women living in a dominant white society, but also strive to dispel the myths existing in both Western and Asian consciousness about the nuances of either culture through their narratives and innovative literary techniques. While not explicitly addressing it in this chapter, the concept of 'liminality' will be used to inflect the reading of the novels to reveal how the fictional constructions are marked by a complexity and multiplicity and that it is necessary for them to shift positions within the 'liminal' spectrum to negotiate life. This is particularly useful as an analytical tool in relation to Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' as we witness women's agency in manifold forms and circumstances. The instances of agency are not restricted to semiotic transactions as in Bhabha's conception but for the most part are related to the material realm – the economic, political and historical conditions. The differential positioning and power inequality among the interlocutors is conspicuous in this chapter, having an impact on their negotiating abilities, thereby endorsing the use of 'liminality' in favour of 'hybridity'.

A Wicked Old Woman

Most of the writing by black and Asian women had originated with the intention of 'giving a voice' to the marginalised and traumatic experience of migration and settlement. This was primarily shaped by high expectations

prior to arrival, followed by racist and class exploitation, intensifying patriarchal oppression in Britain. (Weedon, 2008) As has been noted in the Introduction, black and Asian women's writing had not been at the forefront of literary productions during the post-war years. Their lack of visibility was augmented by the absence of publishing houses who desired to promote women's literature. It was only in the 1970s and 80s that we find a move towards the establishment of writers' workshops organised around locality, class, gender and race where ethnic writers were allowed to participate. Black and Asian women's writing received exposure in the 1980s through the commitment of various women's publishing houses such as Virago, Sheba, Women's Press, the Onlywoman Press and Blackwoman Talk which had come into existence as a result of the feminist movement of the 1970s. The success of black Women's writing in the US had also encouraged British publishers to set up a similar market in the UK. However, a number of Asian women writers found their first means of publication through the Asian Women Writers' Workshop later renamed the Asian Women Writers' Collective. Inspired by the feminist movement and the larger political landscape of the West, this workshop was mainly organised by Ravinder Randhawa the author of the novel initially discussed in this section, to give a voice to women that had been silenced thus far and desiring to move out of the patriarchal stranglehold. As recalled by the editors in *Right of Way* (1989), the workshop's first anthology:

The workshop was formed in 1984, originally the result of lone efforts by Ravi Randhawa, who had managed to get the support of Black Ink and funding from the Greater London Council. ... The workshop was the first of its kind for Asian women writers in Britain, and was meant to draw out any

isolated woman who wanted to write but needed a supportive environment to achieve this. (Collective, 1989: 1)⁴²

The need for such a collective was realised as the emerging Asian women writers discovered that they required a safe enclosed space to explore their problems. While keeping their ethnic identities intact, they wanted to challenge patriarchy. So far, they were “working in a vacuum; there seemed to be no precedents to which we (they) could refer. A few Asian women had been published, but not enough to set up parameters, which we could break or work within”. (p1–2) Working together as a collective had many advantages: it encouraged “Visibility, credibility and access to institutions, publishers and other groups in the community.” (p1) It also provided them with the necessary “confidence to approach publishers, which as individuals we might never have done. It answered the vital question that haunted all of us: is my writing of any interest or use to anyone else?” (p1–2)

Although writers in the collective considered themselves to be British-based Asian writers, not all of them were born and bred in Britain, and brought with them “different cultural and literary influences”. (p2) They were also hesitant to call themselves ‘black’ as they were marginalised by well-meaning white and non-white feminists. A number of them had been “squeezed out of black women’s writing groups where the women were predominantly Afro-Caribbean and the implicit attitude was that the term ‘black’ belonged to them”. (p3) Following the splintering of the term ‘black’ in

⁴² Following the uprisings against racial oppression in the 1970s, changes in legislations on immigration into Britain and the implementation of the government’s multicultural policies in the 1980s afforded funding to these collectives through local councils and provided the collectives such as the Asian Women Writers’ Collective with an edge through diversity which had thus far been absent. Any detailed history of the origin of the collective is currently unavailable and requires further research.

the 1980s into black British and British Asian, such feelings were widespread along with the recognition of their differential cultural practices. Despite working closely with black women's groups, due to the absence of any specific forum for Asian women, the Asianness of the collective was reflected in its name and encouraged young and new woman writers to join the group. In 1992, however, the collective was forced to re-define the term 'Asian' as it "had failed to broaden the definition in a meaningful and practical way". The word 'Asian' thus came to include women beyond South Asian countries, embracing those coming from China, Japan, Turkey and the Diaspora. (South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive, 1989)

Collectives such as the Asian Women Writers Collective can be conceived as a 'liminal' space, providing agency to the writers who are located in a safe and encouraging place to create a text, enjoying the freedom and opportunity to discuss their expressions candidly yet privately, in the company of favourable companions. Though inconspicuous and sheltered from political and commercial censorship, collectives can thus be seen to be a nurturing space, located 'betwixt and between' normative social structures, exploring possibilities in artistic and academic practice. They are a potent force in the hands of the multi-ethnic women writers, already empowered and enabled by their own 'liminality'. The potential of collectives to grow and emerge stronger over time is immense and their impact can be witnessed in the chosen literary and artistic productions.

As stated before, Ravinder Randhawa had a pivotal role in the finding of the Asian Women Writers' Collective and her first novel *A Wicked Old*

Woman (Randhawa, 1987)⁴³ is arguably “the first *explicitly* Asian British novel” published in the post war era by The Women’s Press in 1987.⁴⁴ (Nasta, 2002: 181) Being an immigrant child born in India and brought up in the surroundings of Leamington Spa in the Midlands, Randhawa is part of the new generation of writers who use lived realities of their own lives as the subject matter for their fiction. As Aamer Hussein argues:

Writers in the mid-eighties – influenced perhaps, by the organic boom of African American, Asian American and Hispanic American writing, began to turn to their own lives – and the lived experiences of their communities – for subject –matter and sustenance”. (Hussein, 1994)

Through their writing, not only did such writers sustain themselves but also provided a starved readership with ideas to make sense of their lives and enabled them to progress in new directions. In *AWOW*, Randhawa endeavours to map ‘Britishness’ through Asian eyes. Belonging to the new generation of writers who consider England as their home, Randhawa is more concerned in her writing, as Nasta argues, with “a series of discrete navigations across the frontiers of race and class in Britain”. (Nasta, 2002: 181) Identifying herself as being British, Randhawa’s concern therefore lies with the present and her country Britain, not reminiscing and eulogising for a past or ‘homeland’ left behind.

The author’s position is voiced through her protagonist Kulwant, the wicked old woman of the novel’s title, who professes her desire for a British Asian identity: “she had wanted everything, wanted to be Indian and English,

⁴³ Ravinder Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman* will henceforth be referred with the abbreviation *AWOW*.

⁴⁴ Nasta claims that this has been pointed out by a number of critics Like Ranjana Ash & Aamer Hussein at a conference held at the University of London on the history of Asian writing in Britain in 1995. It is also important to point out that the term ‘British Asian’ only came into existence with the recommendation from the Commission for Racial Equality in 1988 that people of Asian origin residing in Britain would no longer be classified as ‘black’.

wanted to choose for herself what she wanted out of both". (AWOW, p29)

The creation of Kulwant encapsulates the quintessential 'Liminal' Briton: one who lives multiple lives and shifts positions within a 'liminal' spectrum to negotiate everyday life in Britain. The dialectics of opposition or contradiction characterises the peculiar unity of 'liminality' – it is 'neither this, nor that and yet is both'. This peculiar unity gives rise to agency and power which then enables the 'liminal' individual to critique oppressive regimes and resist limitations imposed by social, economic and political factors, just as we witness through the construction of Randhawa's protagonist Kulwant in *AWOW*.

It is important to note that during the 1980s, when Randhawa was writing *AWOW*, contemporary critical theory and cultural criticism was dominated by post-structuralist notions of 'hybridity'. In his seminal book, *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha has stressed on the transformative power of Britain's black and Asian minorities, where their identities can be translated into something new, an altered subject-position, which he argues is a "third space of enunciation". (Bhabha, 1994: 36) This 'hybrid' position in his opinion creates a new interstitial space to challenge the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity, a mode of articulation engendering new possibilities. Despite the appeal of 'hybridity' to contemporary critics as a utopian concept of 'organic' fusion, intervening as a "form of subversion, translation, transformation", Bhabha's theory has been subject to criticism. (Young, 1995: 148) What Bhabha fails to acknowledge are the historical and material realities by which a 'hybrid' identity was to be achieved, especially with reference to gender and class difference. Several

critics have also denounced him for making agency impersonal, involuntary and almost robotic. (Parry, 1996) There is thus a danger in using 'hybridity' as a universal concept, as it may lead to the failure to recognise the histories of certain writers and their specific locations which have a profound impact on their writing.

It was also at this time that 'ethnicity' as a concept underwent redefinition with the interventions of Stuart Hall through his essays. In an essay Hall argues:

Ethnicity can be a constitutive element in the most viciously regressive kind of nationalism or national identity. But in our times, as an imaginary community, it is also beginning to carry some other meanings, and to define a new space for identity. It insists on difference – on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned in a culture, a language, a history. Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular. (Hall, 1996: 119)

Here Hall is highlighting the importance of difference among the various communities and within its people. For him it is imperative to recognise that the person "who speaks and [he/she] who is spoken of, are never identical". (Hall, 1994) He thus contends that cultural identities are fluid, being defined as much by their differences as by their apparent similarities with respect to colour or cultural affiliations. The 'immigrant' therefore comes to be seen to move from the 'margins' to the 'frontline' along with being recognised as a "professional mutator". (Nasta, 2002: 179)

The characters in the novel *AWOW* are both British and Asian – they intentionally adopt differently staged identities along a shifting spectrum which characterises the specific histories of their lives. Occupying different locations within this spectrum, which I would like to call a 'liminal' spectrum,

these characters are able to assert their presence as well as articulate their difference from the dominant society. Rather than considering this state of perennial 'liminality' as disabling, these new generation Britons consider it enabling, as a site of liberation and renegotiation. The starting point however, is Britain, a nation that comes to be re-imagined and re-inscribed in the novel through eyes that are simultaneously Asian and British.

The novel is set in the pre-Thatcherite era of the 1960s and 70s, in the "pre-time to Beatle-time" and when it was not yet "chic to be ethnic". (Randhawa, 1987: 16) Randhawa dramatises the specific moment in British history when, as she recalls about her childhood there was a "racist divide" and a "sentence imposed by the naturalistic equation of gender, culture and race in British society". (Nasta, 2002: 187) The narrative opens with the need for Kulwant, the protagonist to move out of the restrictive spaces of a pre-inscribed cultural identity as a member of an 'ethnic' community and discard the clothes imposed by her past life as an 'Asian woman' and adopt a disguise. Not only does she endeavour to step out of her clothes, but she also crosses the 'threshold' to step out of her house to walk the streets to re-vision and redefine the geographies of her past life. She is however cautious not to "fall" or "flounder in the in between spaces" and "lose the history [of] why you are here". (*AWOW*, p104) She is wary of losing her territory and being sliced off by its "jagged edge". (p41)

Randhawa's "artistic vision is comic, and her writing positive" claims Ghosh-Schellhorn. (Ghosh-Schellhorn, 2001: 238) Possessing a strong affinity to the genre of the picaresque novel, Randhawa's *AWOW* presents a strong realistic spectrum through the gaze of a woman who is simultaneously

inside and outside the societal networks that she participates in. Similar to the picaresque tradition, disguise functions in this novel as Döring contends, “both as a protection and a strategic device by which the character widens her frame of societal references while the narrative widens its focus of social representation that it tries to encompass”. (Döring, 2001: 259) Disguised as an urban tramp, Kulwant is able to have a plurality of vision while escaping the stereotype imposed by her ethnicity. As she makes her way through the urban labyrinth, disconnected and fragmented snapshots are provided to accompany a picaresque plot and it is left to the reader to piece together the pieces like a puzzle and trace the protagonist’s development through the novel – a journey from self-disguise to self-discovery.

In Randhawa’s *AWOW*, use of the ‘liminal’ spectrum reveals refractions of Kulwant’s multiple self-positionings through her journey. Early in the novel, we find Kulwant or Kuli as she is referred to by her friends, introduced as a young girl, the only Asian in her class. Longing to be English, she is seen to cross the ‘threshold’ as it were and engage in a journey, “walking from one world to another” and recounts her attempt at casting off her Indian identity. (*AWOW*, p15) The strength of her intention is proved by engaging in a love affair with an English boyfriend, Michael the Archangel, a marker of integration into an English life. Her engagement in this taboo relationship can be seen as the ‘separation’ phase within the ‘liminal’ spectrum when old ties are loosened in favour of liberation from tradition. While Michael is seen overwhelmed by her exoticism, “creaming her as his ‘Indian princess’”, referring to her as “the mysterious oriental woman” and the “Mata Hari of his heart”, Kuli “feigned nonchalance”. (p6) Instead she is “avid

with hunger to learn, experience and experiment, to step out from her insulated, closed-off home life and dip her feet into the world's whirlpool".(p6) She is keen to liberate herself from traditional and normative constraints and experience what the world has to offer. Her classmates admire her defiance of traditional Indian constriction but paradoxically she herself is tormented by her own treachery.

Living outside the defined parameters of 'home' is rife with complexity for Kuli. Hand asserts that British Asian writers are often concerned "with achieving a balance between the dictates of the society in which they live and the dictates of their Asian heritage". (Hand, 1995: 21) Thus we find in the characters, namely in Kulwant, a tension existing between her private desire and public responsibility, leading to what Randhawa describes as inhabiting a "dangerous territory". (AWOW, p41) Speaking about new generation Britons like her daughter, Kulwant's mother comments: "this country has put you in one of its mixers and whirled you round till you can't tell your inside from your outside, your duty from your rights, your needs from your responsibilities". (p54) As a result, life for such 'liminal' Britons, become dominated by the kind of complexity and inconsistency of meaning theorised by Victor Turner. Thus we find Randhawa articulating Kuli's precarious existence, marked by fluidity and bereft of any essentialising fixity: "her inner world floated in space without history to anchor the location or a future to give it a guiding assurance". (p17) She has fallen in a crack as it were, an in-between space, in the social structure. Her predicament is marked by associations of transgression and ambiguity and is underscored by an epistemological shift whose focus is on limit as 'threshold' (which connects

yet separates), creating a third space. Due to such complexity, we find Kulwant's secret affair and meetings with Michael abruptly terminated. She refuses his proposal for marriage being hesitant to forsake her Indian heritage, and instead dives "off the deep end, into the eye of the whirlpool" by leaving school and announcing her decision to settle for a traditional arranged marriage which shocks her parents immensely. (p52) She becomes a willing participant in an arranged marriage to avoid falling into "holes in the diasporic net".⁴⁵ (Nasta, 2002: 206) What we witness here is a shifting of spaces within the 'liminal' spectrum where Kuli is venturing back and forth to explore and experiment different identities in quest of one she is most comfortable with. Her movement is not unidirectional as suggested by the original proponents of 'liminality' but of a different kind, offering her the freedom to move in either direction. What is also evident is that Kuli's actions and agency are not restricted to any given discursive context, as proposed by Bhabha's 'hybridity', but is marked an autonomy that 'liminality' affords. Kuli's character also validates Randhawa's personal vision that "Literature and characters and ideas are not confined to one particular group, they are fluid". (Döring, 1993) Thus in her novel, we find manifestation of a protagonist who has fluid and multiple identifications.

The critic Hand points out that "British Asian writers are obliged to break down the received versions of Indians" and in *AWOW* we find Randhawa exploding stereotypes. (Hand, 1995: 21) Echoing Hand's assertion, Innes argues that the novel is concerned "with exploring the

⁴⁵ Randhawa quoted in Nasta. Nasta claims that Randhawa had described the diaspora within Britain in terms of a 'net' in a conference paper delivered at Queen Mary and Westfield College in 1995. It was the first conference on the Asian diaspora in Britain.

difficulty of escaping stereotyped identities imposed by the dominant white society". (Innes, 1991: 30) What Randhawa challenges in her novel therefore, is what Leena Dhingra has called the "deeply ingrained old pattern of label-fitting and label – fighting". (Dhingra, 1987: 103) In order to achieve this, Randhawa starts off from the premise that identities are not fixed and are instead open to re-inscription. This is evident from the powerful opening image of the young Kuli trying to put a bindi on a Russian doll. By attempting to transform the fixed face of the doll, Randhawa provides an indication of the way in which multiple selves may be disguised under a familiar exterior.

When we meet the protagonist at the start of the novel, Kulwant is disguised as a homeless lady carrying an 'Oxfam' bag and a walking stick for support shuffling across the street. She narrates with the voice of a middle-aged British-Asian woman, a daughter of parents who had immigrated to Britain in her childhood and someone who has already lived out several lives in this country. This disguise is deliberately employed by Randhawa to hold a mirror to kaleidoscopic images of Kulwant's various past lives and express the need for her to deconstruct any semblance of authenticity that she might have as an 'Asian' voice. Adopting the guise of "an old urban tramp" also enables Kulwant to enter into social boundary crossing: we find her actively accepting the "prevailing class prejudice against social outsiders for the sake of transgressing the stereotypical choices imposed on Asian women in Britain". (Döring, 1993: 259) By appearing as a tramp, Kuli is socially declassified, both in terms of Asian and English societal constraints, enabling her to have greater mobility and claim the "benefit of unbelonging" to any essentialising position. (Ibid)

What Randhawa also does is to juxtapose two opposing stereotypical images of the 'Indian' in the initial chapters of the novel. In 'Kuli's Cover-Up' and 'Kuli's Double-Up', we find opposing but familiar images in Western discourse – “the poverty stricken recipient of European hand-me-downs, the Oxfam Indian, an old and crippled victim” and an “older British image ... the Oriental princess”. (Innes, 1995: 30) In doing this, Randhawa is not only challenging stereotypes but also suggesting the inherent complicity of the paradoxical relationship between the two images, Kulwant's love affair with Michael and her retreat back to the cultural stereotype she was initially trying to escape from, the arranged marriage, “that special feature of [Indianness] emphasized by the Europeans as the mark of difference and unacceptability”. (Innes, 1995: 31)⁴⁶ The emphasis on 'difference' as a critical discourse was highly prevalent when Randhawa was writing and she deliberately uses the metaphor of arranged marriage to highlight the ethnic differences within the novel and explode the established stereotypes.

The refrain “Stick-leg-shuffle-leg-shuffle. Stick-leg-shuffle-leg-shuffle” recurs throughout the novel both as a literary device and a choric frame to present the narration retrospectively as well as a literal sign of negating any dominant notions of the stereotypical 'Indian'. Mark Stein observes that the use of the performative, a masquerade, as a literary device is commonplace in the fiction of many black and Asian writers of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It provides a means by which stereotypes of static ethnicity can be challenged and subverted. Through such techniques, the writer is able to provide authority to previously marginalised voices while simultaneously

⁴⁶ Randhawa uses the arranged marriage as a deliberate marker of difference and unacceptability in Western perception.

shifting the shape of the narrative that frames it. Such discursive practices also become symbolic of the processes of change in the society at large. (Stein, 1998: 90) Randhawa's use of performance through her characterisation of Kulwant is similar to that of the protagonists in Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, all of whom are actors of some sort. There is however, a difference in the usage by Kureishi and Randhawa that Nasta notes:

Whereas Kureishi's Karim ... celebrates the fluidity of his multiple identities, and wears difference like a costume which he can take on and off whenever it suits him, Randhawa's character Kulwant is more sceptical from the beginning about the ultimate effects of such performances. (Nasta, 2002: 204)

Unlike Karim however, Kulwant is not a professional actor and it is both interesting and ironic that at the very end of the novel, Kuli is actually seen stepping out of her disguise and taking part in a documentary film being directed by Maya without any artificial costumes, where the latter shouts out instructions to the protagonist Kuli: "The Director shouts: ACTION". (AWOW, p207)

Viewing with the lens of 'liminality', such performances are similar to the ritual undertaken by an archetypal 'liminal' individual. However, as stated in the Introduction, my conception of 'liminality' avoids any consideration of the ritual context as it restricts the freedom of movement that I wish to propose. Randhawa's protagonist Kulwant adopts different masks and personas in order to explore various stages of a complex British Asian identity. Turner asserts that at these points the ritual subject is between fixed points of classification, in an ambiguous situation, structurally invisible in terms of society's classification systems, very similar to the location of

Kulwant in the novel. (Turner, 1969) By adopting different masks, Kuli is able to extricate herself from any societal classification and glide smoothly along the 'liminal spectrum'.

In an interview, Randhawa has claimed that her writing does not originate from any sense of "certainty" in terms of race and gender, but arises "out of doubt".⁴⁷ (Nasta, 2002) Due to the ambivalence of her own cultural location as an Asian woman writer in Britain, she is constantly motivated by a desire to invent fictional strategies by which to express her duality and ask questions about the representation of women's lives; especially regarding their invisibility in contemporary narratives of Britain's immigrant past. In *AWOW* by describing the different subject positions of her protagonist, she interrogates the nature of 'multiple' existence and assesses power relations within diasporic communities, the Indian community in particular. Despite this attempt however, Randhawa is always conscious of the binaries of universal and particular - that major conflicts of the broader society are not overlooked and rendered invisible in the process of voicing issues of the respective community. Thus we find Maya, a character in the novel stating emphatically: "If we have a right to be here, don't we have a right to be human, warts and all!" (*AWOW*, p105) Through such statements, Randhawa aims to redress balance in her novel and impart universality to it.

Revolving around the positioning of Kulwant in the centre are other characters in the novel that are sewn in with intricate tapestry. Relationships appear as a major theme in the novel and Kulwant's complex relationships with men in particular are especially significant. At the very start of the novel,

⁴⁷ Unpublished interview with Tobias Döring quoted in Nasta.

she is seen engaged in a forbidden relationship with Michael in order to have a taste of English life. Kulwant then moves to another extreme position of agreeing to an arranged marriage. She disappoints her parents who had wanted their daughter to be educated and be exposed to wider horizons. They are shocked by the reversal of the norm: “‘We’re supposed to force you, not you us’, they complained, perplexed and angry”. (p52) Adamant not to “toe the line” of any social norm, she performs the ritual of marrying a trainee doctor from India with high recommendations from his family in Britain. Her intent is to become “what she wanted to be”: an “Indian bride”. (p52-53) She proclaims to her mother: “Can’t live your life for you mother – this is mine and it’ll be me who’ll live it”. (p54) A characteristic feature of new generation Britons, the young Kulwant demonstrates the courage and keenness to take life in her own hands and confront its consequences.

Kuli’s arranged marriage is not a success. We are informed later in the novel that her husband is engaged with a younger woman Kurshid. Kuli has two children Anup and Arvind but due to her deviance from the norm, she has been unable to become an ‘ideal’ wife from a traditional Indian male perspective. As her son Anup accusingly points out to her: “If you had been more of a wife ... more as a woman should be, Dad wouldn’t have been attracted elsewhere”. (p100) In retrospect, Kuli reflects that “instead of providing a comfortable home she had insisted on bringing arguments and controversies into her family life”. (p101) The marriage left her feeling “empty and disappointed”, yearning for passion that she had expected from her life as an exotic Indian bride. (p112) Through the depiction of this troubled relationship, Randhawa points to the traditional patriarchal notions of Indian

femininity which colour the idea and expectations of Indian men. Certain characteristics are invested in the role of a 'wife' in the diasporic Indian community and when challenged by the marginalised woman, the marriage falls apart as the hierarchy of power is disturbed. Kuli's arranged marriage predictably fails, her husband implicating the negative influence of Britain as "Another one of England's gifts". Kulwant however, is more objective as she sums up in the parting exchange: 'It's not England. It's what's wrong between us'. (p61)

Patriarchy and gender trouble features strongly in the problematic relationship between Kulwant and Mark, the latter a charming English lover with whom Kuli shared political dreams and is engaged in an extramarital relationship. Endearingly rechristened Karm (as retaliation for his mutilation of her name), he is an academic with political aspirations. Unwilling to fall prey to "another white" man after Michael, Kuli is enchanted by Mark's wit and intelligence along with his analytical mind. She is amazed to find that their thoughts are in tandem and words interlinked. Her interest in politics surprises him provoking the patronising exclamation: "I can't believe an Asian woman can be like this". (p117) What started as a political partnership transforms into love. Occupying the 'liminal' phase of the spectrum Kuli is remorseless for her adultery. Describing her feelings, the omniscient narrator observes: "She hadn't felt adulterous and she hadn't felt unfaithful for what she shared with Karm, she hadn't ever shared with her husband. She didn't feel she was taking away from him to give to someone else". (p111-112) Unfettered from all moorings, she journeys a long distance with him: "from being two separate individuals to being one, thinking like one, acting like one,

laughing like one, machinating like one. Or so she had believed". (p143) It turns out that she had deluded herself into believing that "politics and a relationship could synchronise ... It wasn't true". (p117) The sweetness of the relationship turns bitter with "making allowances, which turned into excuses, deliberately ignoring with her brain what her eyes saw for themselves". (p117) Frustrated with her predicament she leaves both the party and Mark – the relationship crudely ending with a hostile parting.

In hindsight, Mark's altered behaviour is transparent to Kuli – his political aspirations could not allow for "a sordid love affair with a married woman hanging around his neck. Particularly an Asian woman". (p143) Apart from using her as an object for entertainment, friendship with her was his contribution to anti-racism, a ploy to secure the Asian vote. Kuli is dismayed by the revelation and reluctant to join this "brand of snakepit" again. (p144) Comprehending Mark's intention of exploiting her exotic connections to fulfil his own political aspirations, she is defiant against such subservience. She recognises her marginal position within the hierarchy of their power relations. Shattered by his betrayal, she is also obdurate to the lure of becoming the first Asian woman MP for the fear of being reconnected with his malevolent influence.

Kulwant's challenging relationships with her sons are not merely an example of her refusal to submit to patriarchal domination but through their depiction Randhawa provides an illustration of class, generational and educational variations within the Asian community. What we find is a convergence of race, class and gender issues in Randhawa's representation of British Asian characters. While Kuli's son Arvind with minimal education

chooses Shirley a white English working-class girl as his partner, Anup, an erudite intellectual, member of the 'buppie' (Black Yuppies) class of Asians, has Pavan as his spouse, a professional from a middle-class family in India. Randhawa also draws attention to the duality of these characters. In order to negotiate the shifting dimensions of his dual identity, Arvind is keen to anglicise his name and refer to himself as Arnold. He marries Shirley despite his parents' reluctance, unwilling to abide by Indian customs and rituals. Anup, on the other hand considers himself "part of an elite" society which Kuli euphemistically refers to as 'D.E.A.D' (doctors, lawyers, accountants and dentists), and chooses to follow a conventional path. Unlike Arvind, Anup desires anonymity. He prefers to remain invisible in a white dominated society. "Conscious of his comforts and fearful of the unknown" he is lacking in courage "to step outside the threshold of the established order", an attitude denounced by Kulwant, his "unorthodox mother" who dares to venture the unknown. (p100-101)

Friendship is a dominant theme in this novel, illustrated through the relation between Kuli (Cooeee) and Caroline. "Friendships" for Randhawa are a strange admixture. They are:

peculiar creatures, half here, half there, half imagined, half understood, half misunderstood, half fact, half fiction, half something, half nothing, half a story, half a truth, half of this person and half of the other, A hybrid and, like the paper boats you set it in the water and watch it finding its own path through the eddies and currents. (p42)

In this eloquent analysis of the uniqueness of friendship, Randhawa attempts to capture the essence of a true friendship. In *AWOW*, she explores the distinctiveness of the friendship between two childhood friends - one Asian and the other English. Caroline, we are informed is a "charming English girl"

who is “polite, well dressed and you could see she came from a good family”. (p15) Good lineage is important to the Indian sensibility and aids Caroline’s acceptance as Kuli’s friend. By embarking on a friendship with Caroline, Kuli is undertaking a literal and metaphorical journey, “from one world to another”, an experiment in shifting spaces by performing a ritual almost. The “allurement” and “procurement” of the idea of ‘England’, for an immigrant’s child, is equated with that of Caroline’s house – crammed with “lovingly laid displays of urges”. (p15)

Among the various uncertainties of Kulwant’s life, her friendship with Caroline is perhaps the most constant and stable factor. It is Caroline who has provided her with a glimpse into the inner world of the English, been witness to her love affair with Michael and introduced her to politics, provoked her to cross the ‘threshold’, “wanting her friend to step out of the sidelines, to do something for herself and others”. (p44) Kuli’s loveless marriage has found empathy from Caroline as she too has had similar experience and struggled with her role as a single mother. Unable to find a medical cure for her depressed mind, Caroline has resorted to Kuli’s mother’s special ‘oriental’ tea – for comfort, both emotional and psychological: “The tea warmed where I was coldest, fed me where I’d never known I was hungry.” (p44) Through their friendship, Randhawa questions popular perceptions privileging white English experience over Indian/black experience, a contentious issue in the feminist discourse of the time. Writing against the grain, Randhawa indicates that sometimes the roles are inverted and solace can be found within Asian/Eastern traditions rather than western

aid. Moreover, she also urges that in spite of their race, they share similar predicament and seek support in each other.

Encountering upheavals in her life, Caroline experiences the sensation of falling out of one's world, something that Kuli being a first-generation immigrant has been confronted with since her arrival in Britain. Being objective and discerning, Caroline also observes the primacy of patriarchal oppression on women. She reflects: "we're nothing but their stepping-stones, useful when we're fashionable, displayable and adorable; practical around the house when we need to be kept in the background". (p47) In spite of being white and belonging to the dominant English society, being a woman makes her predicament universal. As a woman Caroline is conferred an inferior status illustrating the novel's ideology – an older feminist faith in the universality of women's oppression. Empathising with Caroline's despair and emptiness, Kuli highlights their identical situation:

We've been through the mangle but they didn't squeeze all the juice out of us. Asian or English, did it make a difference to the amount of pain you carried through your lifetime? 'We may be sailing in different boats but the sea is the same'. (p48)

Here Randhawa refers to women's agency as being the essential ingredient for tackling oppression. She also critiques the power and gender relations within both Indian and English communities and alludes to the meaning of British national identity and its implicit assumption of whiteness. Through Kuli's statement, the novel points to the debate raging between black and white feminisms in the 1970s and 80s about the privileging of white experience over black experience and anticipates Avtar Brah's assertion of the importance of gender and class over all other axes of differentiation in

her influential essay 'Difference, Diversity and Differentiation'.⁴⁸ Despite the differences between 'them' and 'us', 'East' and 'West' highlighted by Hall's theory of 'ethnicity', Randhawa comments that as women their positions remain similar.

Although *AWOW* focuses on Kulwant, the novel provides a portrait of a group of women who comprise her family, relatives, friends and acquaintances from different generations and diverse backgrounds. Marriage is a prevailing theme in the novel and features prominently in the lives of these British Asian women. Ammi, a representative of the older generation, is an immigrant who had an arranged marriage. Through her example Randhawa remarks on the issue of arranged marriage, destroying its fanciful myth prevalent in the minds of many young Asian women⁴⁹:

Arranged marriages don't equip you to cope with lust and loss. Not that these things don't happen there, but when they do it's in and around the old weather beaten framework of family, friends and social pressure. (p63)

Unable to sustain herself in the face of abandonment from husband, Ammi is reliant on her family and friends, especially on daughters Big Sis and Kurshid for support. She is also relentlessly haunted by nightmares, envisioning being caught in a vortex from which she is "unable to break through and free herself". (p122)

Big Sis, Ammi's eldest daughter, is a powerful character in the novel and marriage poses a different problem for her. In order to support her

⁴⁸ In her essay 'Difference, Diversity and Differentiation', Brah argues: " 'white' feminism or 'black' feminism in Britain are not essentialist categories but rather [that] they are fields of contestation inscribed within discursive and material processes and practices in a post-colonial terrain. They represent struggles over political frameworks for analysis ... But they should not, in my view, be understood as constructing 'white' and 'black' women as 'essentially' fixed oppositional categories". (Brah, 1996: 111)

⁴⁹ As a young girl, Kulwant too had been swayed by the exotic image of the Indian bride and had desired an arranged marriage.

family, she has abandoned studies at school and taken up a job at a factory. Thus when approached with a marriage proposal, Big Sis denies vehemently despite her mother's persuasion. Not only is she sceptical about the prospect of marriage following her mother's experience, she harbours a strong philosophy: "marriage was the same as the clothes, food, household articles that they could never afford". (p68-9) Big Sis commodifies marriage and envisages it as easily dispensable. Being pragmatic, she privileges her job prospects and higher salary. Observing her reluctance for marriage, Mrs Khan is engulfed with cynicism:

God knows when you send your daughters out to work; who can control the people they mix with? They get a pay-packet in their hands and think they're 'independent'. If you're with English people all the time, it's not long before you pick up their ways. (p69)

Here Randhawa not only manifests the lack of priority given to marriage by some new generation women, but also reveals their pragmatism. Moreover, the author underscores the negative attitude of older generation women who consider England as a hostile nation imparting dreadful habits to their future generation. She highlights the dialectic between older and new generation multi-ethnic women: while the former are engulfed in negativity and find Britain to be an 'alien' nation, the latter consider England as their home and possess the urge to negotiate their circumstances with greater positivity.

Women's agency plays a significant role in the novel, and is illustrated not only through the protagonist but also through the character of Big Sis. Being a 'liminal' individual, she is characterised by a peculiar unity which enables her to possess both agency and power. She is delighted at the prospect of becoming a "forewoman at the factory" (69) and is seen to be

promoted to the position of a Union leader to protect the interest of factory workers – Asian women workers in particular. Through her characterisation, Randhawa is contesting the stereotypical notion of Asian women as passive, meek and submissive in favour of someone who has courage and agency. The construction of Big Sis's character is highly reminiscent of Jayaben Desai's role at the Grunwick Strike in 1977, as recalled at the start of the chapter. Big Sis is deliberately constructed as an active agent to challenge the image of the Asian woman as subservient and inactive. What is also interesting is the class dimension within the characters – it is apparent in the novel that working class women's identity is different from that of elite or middle class women. Being a 'liminal' individual empowers her to critique the oppressive hegemonic regimes encountered at the factory and she is ready to resist any limitations imposed by social structures.⁵⁰

Agency is also visible in the character of Rani/Rosalind, an immigrant child from India struggling to cope with her dual identity – Indian and British. Life as an "urban nomad", unfettered by any normative constraints, is her chosen path as she chooses to avoid the pre-inscribed future of a stereotypical 'Asian woman' in Britain. Occupying a 'liminal' position provides her with agency and power, enabling her to challenge dominant and oppressive patriarchal regimes. Thus we find her resisting against gender divisions in "England's 'liberal'" society, and expressing her disgust at women's inferior status: "a woman is still nothing except her spot of blood, her vaginal passage. Judged by who she's with rather than what she is".

⁵⁰ This is in stark contrast to Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity' which elides the material realm in his analysis of agency, and is only restricted to semiotic transactions. This clearly exposes the limitation of Bhabha's concept, making 'liminality' a far more conducive theory in this context.

(p123) As the story unfolds, we witness Rani/Rosalind undergoing severe mental turmoil caused by conflicts raging within her, which Nasta calls a “voyage into a state of psychological instability and desolation” creating “a number of political reverberations”. (Nasta, 2002: 209)⁵¹ Randhawa also points to the vulnerability of women and their resistance to overt exploitation of their bodies through Rani. Following the episode related to her flatmate Rosco’s attempt at raping her and the latter’s retaliation by killing him, Rani/Rosalind retreats from society altogether. She is found lying in hospital, “staring at the white ceiling” unable to close her eyes to the horrific scenes of the murder.

Apart from her importance as a ventriloquist voicing the author’s concerns, Rani/Rosalind’s role is a structural framing device. It is at her bedside that the author/narrator weaves the narratives of the lives of other women, which run parallel to that of her – Ammi, Angie, Maya and Big Sis, all of whom try to nurse Rani back from the depths of despair. Tied together not by religion or background, political affiliation or cultural consensus, these characters are all members of the ‘community’ sharing a similar predicament, having presence as ‘Asians’ in Britain. Through them Randhawa articulates a serious political message about the power of the ‘community’. As Soni tells Maya towards the end of the novel: “I’m not saying everyone should go off and live in a commune, or be a hippy or that kind of thing, it’s just that we all need each other and we gotta do things for each other”. (AWOW, p197) The novel asserts belief in the power of the community to transform the present and provide the possibility for growth. Big Sis astutely notes: “Forget fiction.

⁵¹ Through Rani, Randhawa narrativises familiar media portrayals of Asian women suffering from cultural conflicts and leaving home.

Real life is where the drama lies”. (p79) It is the complexity of ‘real’ existence that has to be negotiated by new generation Britons, not an artificial adaptation of masks like Kulwant. Rani’s situation jolts Kuli out of her experiments and she abandons her persona as a crippled old woman. In an epiphanic moment she realises that her disguise as a homeless cripple is not an image of empowerment but a sign of instability and weakness. Adoption of ‘fake’ identities cannot help her address the political causes of her precarious location – it is a reality she has to deal with. Thus we find her/ the author declaring: “No more trying to walk in the middle. There were too many potholes and she was like a blind woman without a stick. Safer to stay in the territory she knew”. (p29) At the end of the novel, Maya the Myopic, as Patricia Duncker points out, “writes her own screen play, where the community is gathered together, to tell their stories to the small white screen and to the reader of Randhawa’s text”. (Duncker, 1992: 237) All they are awaiting is “ACTION”. (Randhawa, 1987: 207)

“Ravinder Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman* did for South Asian migrants what the film *My Beautiful Launderette* had set out to do – and faltered” claims the writer and critic Aamer Hussein. Abandoning traditional narrative styles and “customary decorum” adopted by Asian women writers of the previous generation, Hussein points to Randhawa’s use of language in “richly demotic prose”. According to him,

Randhawa also introduced the perspectives of the generation lost to previous fiction, the South Asians born and/or brought up in England’s inner cities, to whom ‘home’, however seductive, is a somewhat fantastic notion, given the functional realities of racism and their stunning sense of distance from their parents’ identities and identifications. (Hussein, 1994: 16)

Hussein speaks of the various ways in which Randhawa's novel can be considered as groundbreaking in terms of British Asian writing. Unable to rely on any existing suitable fictional strategy, Randhawa has had to carve out for herself new discursive spaces to adequately articulate the diversity and complexity of British Asian existence. Through her innovative fictional technique, combining the picaresque with realist writing tradition, she has paved the way for the future British Asian writers to follow. Moreover, as Hussein observes and as pointed out before with regard to writers from the mid-eighties and nineties, the focus in the writing of British Asian writers' including Randhawa is on 'lived realities' and the idea of 'home' in England despite its complexities. It is their negotiation of 'Britishness' that is the subject-matter of their novels and an articulation of their multiplicity.

'Singing Punjabi with a Birmingham accent'

Anita and Me (Syal, 2004) is a Betty Trask Award winning novel by Meera Syal first published in 1996. Born in Wolverhampton in the Midlands, Syal is a multi-faceted artist who has had an extremely successful career in the British media as a comedienne, playwright, journalist, writer, producer and an actress. A rare feat for any black and Asian artist from the Midlands or any region of the United Kingdom, she has gained popularity as a script writer for BBC television series *My Sister Wife* and the first Asian comedy sketch series *Goodness Gracious Me* initially broadcast on Radio 4 before being screened on television. Using her media popularity as a springboard, Syal launched her writing career with the Asian Women Writer's Collective

founded by Randhawa and her first novel *Anita and Me* (1996) achieved critical and commercial acclaim through the Betty Trask Award and nomination for the Guardian Fiction Award.

Syal had previously found recognition with her play '*One of Us*' for which she received the National Student Drama Award, and was invited to write the script for the Channel 4 film *Bhaji on the Beach*, discussed in the following chapter. Her second novel, *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee*, published in 1999 did not receive similar acclaim as the former but is an ambitious and provocative attempt to tell a story about the choices faced by new generation British Asian women rendered down with hilarious comedy. This section will start with a discussion of Syal's first novel *Anita and Me*⁵² and then move on to a reading of her following novel *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee*.

For almost half a century, there have been several attempts at re-telling history and stories by a number of black and Asian writers, especially those narrating their experiences of living in the metropolitan 'hub' of Britain, London. From Samuel Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* (1956) to Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), there has been a lively trend of bestselling novels emerging with their focus on the metropolis of London. Continuing the tradition in the new millennium, black and Asian women's writing like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2001), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004) also provide some fascinating accounts articulating diasporic experiences from the well-established 'multi-cultural space' of London. In her novel *A&M*, Syal too undertakes this task of "giving a voice" to her experiences of being an Asian girl in a predominantly

⁵² Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* is henceforth referred to with the abbreviation *A&M*.

white community but her uniqueness lies primarily in the location of her novel which is set in the Midlands. This is a significant shift away from the customary 'space' from which several writers have voiced their experiences in the attempt to extricate themselves from a feeling of marginalisation and solitude. Syal's distinctiveness lies in the fact that her novel narrates her experiences from the 'periphery' *per se*, where there are widely emerging multicultural and multi-racial communities.

In *A&M*, Syal's depiction of the British Asian subject is portrayed against the backdrop of the late 1960s, which, as Dunphy describes, was "a melting-pot period when British pluralism was born". (Dunphy, 2004: 649) With the dissemination of multiculturalist ideologies in the West, literary expressions on either side of the Atlantic increasingly dealt with representations of childhood in postmodern, multicultural societies in an optimistic and positive manner. A paradigmatic shift in culture is witnessed in these works since diversity and multitude is given precedence over discourses of the 'centre' and 'margin'. Syal's novel written in 1996, in the presence of the New Labour government, too seems dominated by similar multiculturalist ideology which privileges diversity as a positive experience and identity formation is based on multiple premises rather than the concept of a homogenising mainstream ideal. The novel is written in an interesting moment in history, when a number of new generation writers have entered

the field of media and are attempting to reconstruct their childhood experience and milieu.⁵³

The geographical setting of Syal's *A&M* is the mining village of Tollington, just outside the city of Wolverhampton and close to the city of Birmingham. The location of the fictional village is very much in the heart of a predominantly white working class community. The protagonist Meena, the nine-year old daughter of immigrant Punjabi parents, Mr. and Mrs. Kumar, narrates her experiences of living within this working-class community and endeavours to integrate with it in the early 1970s, thereby providing a fascinating angle through which to view the creation of the 'Asian British' subject and the world in which she resides. This location of the sole Asian immigrant family in a rural English countryside is atypical of writing of this particular period – the late 60s and early 70s - and makes it one of the few 'migrant' texts that are not set in an urban context. Even though the novel does not provide any dates, the references to the contemporary children's television programmes indicate an era at the turn of the sixties and the seventies.

Like the author, Meena too is a second-generation member of the immigrant Indian community. Syal, born in 1963, was brought up in the Staffordshire mining village of Essington, located in the outskirts of Wolverhampton. Graeme Dunphy observes that on occasions, it is difficult to distinguish between the protagonist and the narrator, who is the same child grown up; there are instances in the novel when "the narrator does bring an

⁵³ A parallel may be drawn with Hanif Kureishi's autobiographical novel *'Buddha of Suburbia'* (1990) where he tries to reconstruct his experiences of living in 1970s London and its suburbs.

adult perspective to bear on the things she is remembering and alludes to the insights which she gained much later". (Dunphy, 2004) This interplay of the two focal points, offers a double vision: "the child's experience, and the adult narrator's use of that experience" and constitutes a "recurrent theme in the immigrant artist's struggle to make sense of their lives". (Davis, 1999: 141) I would like to argue that this plurality of vision is characteristic of a 'liminal' Briton where the individual can occupy multiple positions within a 'liminal' spectrum. The different perspectives of the protagonist/narrator and child/adult is indicative of a shifting of spaces within the spectrum enabling a range of visions, multiplicity and fluidity that new generation British Asian women possess.

An outstanding feature of this novel is Meera Syal's inimitable style of writing, depicting a diverse range of intense emotions – sorrow, love, jealousy, rivalry, betrayal, all of which are leavened with a comic, amusing and lucid prose and braided together with the histories of the times. A fallacy that many black and Asian writers often tend to harbour is that they should only be writing about the encounter with the 'Other', but unlike writers of the post-war generation, Syal is able to underscore the inseparability of the particularities of race and ethnicity and the universalities of love and betrayal which are always intrinsically interlinked. In fact, the novel begins by distancing itself from the stereotypical migrant narrative by mocking it in the prefatory section where it stages the 'Windrush' moment as it were: the sweated labour, appalling housing conditions, pregnancy, exclusion etc. Such obligatory realism generic to postcolonial migrant discourse is given

less substance in favour of focusing on a different mode of realism highlighting universal issues of identity, love and betrayal in Syal's novel.

In mid – twentieth century Britain, Asians with their different culture, customs, language, dress and their extended families, were viewed as a society apart. Ironically, they were also seen as industrious, eager to climb the social and economic ladder by educating themselves, as well as being honest and diligent people possessing virtues which shored up a bourgeois society. Constituting the middle layer of the 'colonial sandwich' as it were (with the black Africans constituting the bottom layer), it was not easy for the sole Asian family in the village to assimilate with an abandoned mining community, Tollington. In a speech by the British Home Secretary Roy Jenkins in 1966, integration was defined "not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance".⁵⁴ Syal uses this historical milieu to draw a fictional universe and paints the portrait of a young protagonist trying not merely to integrate but also to find her own 'space' within it.

The narrative technique employed by Syal in *A&M* is one where the world is depicted through the eyes of a young girl Meena as she is growing up in her two formative school years. In my analysis of the novel, I will be focusing on three dominant themes in Syal's novel, those that surface frequently in the process of translating history into a fictional universe. The twin tropes of 'familiarity' and 'estrangement' loom large as Meena is continually forced to encounter the dichotomy between the two during her life

⁵⁴ 'Address given by the Home secretary, the Rt. Hon. Roy Jenkins, MP, on 23 May 1966 to a meeting of Voluntary Liaison Committees' London, NCCI., 1966.

in the village. The question of 'belonging' is also a recurrent theme as the protagonist struggles to find her place in different communities and cultures – English and Indian - as well as gender and class. 'Friendship' is another major theme in the novel as engaging in a friendship with Anita Rutter not only enables Meena to experience English culture at first hand but also demonstrates an attempt to forge links between the two cultures, forming a bridge across the differences, an idea promoted by the novel in my reading. The complexity of a 'liminal' existence emerges from this friendship and brings to the fore the ambiguities negotiated by a new generation Briton.

By focusing on the Midlands, along the outskirts of the urban centres of Birmingham and Wolverhampton, Syal encourages the reader, in James Procter's words, to "territorialise diasporic cultural production and pay attention to the regional and economic unevenness of the black *British* landscape". (Procter, 2003: 142) Syal creates the landscape to reflect the bleakness and despondency existing in the minds of its inhabitants as a consequence of the closure of mines and collapse of industrialisation in the Midlands. It is a landscape through which she is reading history. The dull and dreary geography of the location with its old tithe cottages, dirt yard and blocked mining shafts signify the end of a distraught mining community with little hope for the future. As described in the novel, even the slides in the overgrown park have a 'rickety' appearance and the meadows are populated with "carcasses of abandoned agricultural machinery", reflecting the demise of an era that had once existed among the semi-rural community. (A&M, p12) The miner's strike of 1974 followed by its recurrence in 1984 had formed a significant impact on the author's childhood memory and finds

reflection in her semi-autobiographical novel.⁵⁵ In her fictional universe, Syal depicts Tollington's history as having been once a vibrant mining community with the mine employing people from the whole village and being a major contributor to the Black Country's economy. However, the sudden closure of the mine in Syal's fictional town in the late Fifties, with only a few miners still retaining employment in the adjoining pits, wreaked havoc within the small community. While some able-bodied men along with their families moved on to explore new avenues, the elderly and the disabled along with a load of miners' widows were left behind. Syal's village is also populated with "tough, broad-armed women" (p14) (who worked in the metal casings factory in the nearby industrial estate of New Town) and some fragile old men. The narrator informs that the Ball Bearings factory had opened in the vicinity as a compensation for the mine closure but it was mainly women who they sought to employ due to their readiness to do piecework and their easy complicity. Procter observes, "Tollington's defence of its landscape emerges in response to plans by the council to develop and urbanise the village". (Procter, 2003) The author refers to council proposals recommending closure of the village school, construction of the motorway extension adjacent to the old mine's railway and redevelopment of the obsolete mine –described as a "crumbling monument to a halcyon past" (*A&M*, p143) - into a shopping or leisure centre. Threatened by impending modernisation, however, the 'bucolic village' considers itself 'besieged' (p191) and defends its heritage

⁵⁵ The miner's strikes of 1974 and 1984 had significant social and political impact on post-war Britain and managed to fracture the nation. The 1974 strike in demand for improved pay had destroyed Ted Heath's Conservative government while the strikes during 1984-5, during the Thatcherite regime led to the demise of the mining industry in Britain with majority of mining pits being closed. Communities relying on mining suffered enormously due to these closures. Trade Union power was also quashed as a result of the strikes with the leaders of the National Union of Mineworkers virtually emasculated.

robustly. Despite the exodus of a few members of the community, the village is able to entice some new families, mainly immigrants, desiring to exploit cheap suburban housing and country air.

In the novel, a family able to extricate themselves from the lure of living in the inner-city ghettos, accepting the challenge of settling in a suburban area are the Kumars. Despite being prospectless in the face of urbanisation, Meena's parents have deliberately chosen this location because of its fields, trees, light and space, all of which "could almost look something like home". (p35) Moreover, they can benefit from the cheap housing in the countryside and yet live within commutable distance of their work and friends, their metaphorical extended family. However, in spite of being newcomers to the village, they cannot escape the deep-seated desolation of the region. Their front garden is conspicuous in its raggedness and lack of elegance as it is totally devoid of the beautiful flowers and hedges that adorn most front gardens in affluent suburbs. Instead, the Kumars' front garden is only a "boring rectangle of lumpy grass bordered with various herbs" (p15) that Mrs Kumar grew to garnish her Indian meals.

The dichotomy between familiarity and estrangement is an aspect that Meena has to confront repeatedly in the novel; the author has constructed this dialectic that finds representation in this novel through discussions of race and class. While the Kumars' immediate neighbour Mrs Worral treats them with deferential respect and loves Meena like her own grandchild, Sandy, another neighbour confides in Daljit, Meena's mother, - "You're so lovely. You know, I never think of you as ...foreign. You're just like one of us"(p29), revealing the tension caused by their 'difference' or 'foreignness'.

While Sandy verbalises the tension positively, there are plenty of instances where it finds articulation through caustic racist abuse. The moment of hearing phrases like: “Bloody stupid wog. Stupid woggy wog. Stupid” (p97) shocks Meena, a nine-year old girl completely insulated from verbal aspects of racism. Unable to wipe the insult off her mind, it leaves her feeling “hurt, angry, confused, and horribly powerless because this kind of hatred cannot be explained”. (p97) Ironically, when Meena is desperate to narrate her shocking experience of racism to her father, she finds a soft knowing expression on his face, of someone who has witnessed, experienced and tolerated it all since his entry into Britain as an immigrant. The gentleness of Meena’s father’s face is juxtaposed against the harshness of racial hatred experienced by Meena. This awareness of ‘difference’ becomes an extremely painful personal encounter for the young protagonist as she endeavours to discover her place in the society where she finds herself situated.

Familiarity holds a different meaning for Meena’s parents as they belong to a generation which fits the image of the stereotypical immigrant having been subject to experiences of discrimination, struggle and disillusionment since their arrival in the ‘Motherland’. Like most colonial immigrants described in the Introduction, the Kumars too had arrived in Britain from the Indian subcontinent with a fascinating dream of crafting a good life for themselves; gaining financial security, escaping poverty, desolation and political strife in the aftermath of the Partition in the homeland. However, it had all proved a colossal myth, as the early years were spent living in a “shabby boarding house room” (p9) shared with

another immigrant Polish family. In spite of being well educated, Shyam, Meena's father had to work shifts in a sweatshop as employment for the 'coloured' people was scarce and everyone was classed as being semi-skilled under a sweeping generalisation. The conditions of living were so appalling that the baby Meena had to sleep in a drawer over a bedding of old crumpled newspapers and her mother, a simple Punjabi girl from India, was left shell-shocked by a culture that had established its supremacy over their colonial subordinates for centuries but had no intention of welcoming the subjects to their country with an open hand nor treat them as equal human beings. While reminiscing about his initial experiences in Britain, Mr. Kumar recalls familiar experiences of racism:

You remember walking around Swiss Cottage, trying to find a boarding house that did not have that sign 'No Irish, Blacks or Dogs?' [...] You know that old trick, you ring up and get an interview in your best voice, then they see your face and suddenly the job is gone. (p165)

Meena's experience of racism was not an exceptional incident but a familiar occurrence for her father, for whom it had only brought back memories of their earlier life in the new country. Instead, what we have in Meena's account is a difference of experience. Generational difference separates them, forcing them to negotiate different spaces. However, as a child of the new generation, Meena has an ease of negotiation with such issues which her parents do not. She has been brought up in Britain and considers Britain as her 'home'. She is not engulfed by nostalgia for a home left behind and looks forward to confronting the complexities of existence in contemporary Britain. Generational difference features as a familiar theme in the literary

productions of many new generation multi-ethnic women writers and marks a distinction from the work of previous generation writers.

Even within a familiar environment, the naivety and ignorance of some of the white community members astound Meena. She is astonished to learn that one of her classmates is of the notion that the name Black Country was derived particularly because “so ...many darkies... live” in the area. Such oddities strike a deeper chord when Diedre, Anita’s mother, decides to christen their dog “Nigger”. Simply hearing the name nearly chokes Meena and her mother, who consider it an insult: “Black, brown, what does it matter?...Just because we are not black, it is still an insult!”(p90).⁵⁶ Through these casual instances Syal clearly reflects how deeply embedded racial prejudices are in Western culture. She endeavours to point out that despite having multi-racial societies in Britain in the seventies, as a nation it was yet to become multi-racial. Institutional racism was entrenched within the nation supported by right wing political organisations which encouraged the racist ideologies to be prevalent in societies dominated by multi-racial population.

Syal’s story though fictional, is set against real historical events. Such racist tendencies were fuelled by the growth of certain right wing organisations at the time who, in the style of Enoch Powell, believed that a supposed threat was being posed to the British way of life by ‘immigrants with alien cultures’. (King, 1979; cf: Taylor, 1979) This was enhanced by a pre-election speech by Margaret Thatcher in 1978 stating that the ‘British

⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that here we witness a kind of racial solidarity that is absent from contemporary society in the new millennium. Narrating the story of a fictional society set in the 70s, Syal demonstrates the solidarity that existed with the blacks, who were meted out the same kind of treatment as Asians. At that time, the political term ‘black’ thus held immense potency.

way of life' needed protection, since 'this country might be swamped by people with a different culture'. (Brah, 1996: 37) Even though this was a ploy commonly used by politicians to solicit votes, the extreme right-wing groups gained in respectability and credibility through the support of 'mainstream' politicians. It manifested itself in the increasing occurrences when shaved headed boys, 'skinheads' as they are popularly labelled, were witnessed hurling abuses at some friends of the Kumars in other parts of the Midlands, mistreating their children due to visible difference of colour. The 1970s witnessed such racial violence and harassment escalate throughout the country, culminating in 'Blood on the Streets', a report that illustrated the scale of violence suffered by the Bangladeshi community in the Spitalfields area of the Tower Hamlets of London. The intensity of the problem is discernible from the report by the Runnymede Trust who estimated that "between January 1970 and November 1989, 74 people had died as a result of attacks which were either known to be racially motivated or widely believed to be within the black community".⁵⁷ (Skellington & Morris, 1996)

The racist incident that is perhaps most revelatory for Meena is when Sam Lowbridge, the gang-leader of the youngsters in the community, engages in a tirade against the parish head:

Yow don't do nothing but talk, "Uncle". And give everything away to some darkies we've never met. We don't give a toss for anybody else. This is our patch. Not some wogs' handout. (A&M, p193)

Such racist outburst in defence of their territory/landscape shocks and surprises Meena, who had thus far considered Sam as one of her 'mates'. It

⁵⁷ See also Gordon, 1990. This should not be taken as the maximum total as other attacks may have remained unreported.

instils horror in her that she had been ignorant of the true feelings of people she lived amidst and even considered as her friends. The feeling is further compounded by the encouraging utterances of Mr. Ormerod, the village grocer and devout parishioner, bellowing in support of Sam and her friend Anita's exclamation – "In't he bosting!...Sam Lowbridge. He's dead bloody hard, in't he?" (p195). Through this shocking revelation of "how the familiar could turn into the unknown" (p175) Syal forces Meena to question her Otherness to the small mining community and increases her consciousness of racism. The dichotomy between familiarity and estrangement reaches a crescendo here forcing Meena to reconsider her friendships and her position in the white working class community.

Moreover, the Kumars' knowledge of the English language, their speech without an accent, education and profession renders them in a different class to the rest of the village. It also places them in a culturally superior position, while the villagers, despite belonging to a seemingly superior race, are inferior culturally and in terms of class. Despite Meena's best efforts, the protagonist's difference from the rest of the working class community is magnified and her assimilation denied. Inside the tiny village, genuine feelings of the villagers are masked by their ostensible friendliness but defence of their territory/land supersedes all civility. "Thus", argues Branach-Kallas, Meena's family "are apparently welcome, though under a false disguise, inside the imaginative borders of the nation". (Branach-Kallas, 2004: 140) Syal dramatises attitudes prevalent in the macrocosm of the nation through incidents within the microcosm of the village.

Women writers bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experience. Viewing *A&M* from a 'liminal' perspective reveals the ambiguities and multiple meanings of British Asian existence of new generation Britons. As stated by Davis in his essay on the novel, a child's psychology works in a peculiar fashion: "beyond the ordinary child's desire to belong to a group and be recognized lurks the alien child's more passionate need to be part of the mainstream, not to be considered different". (Davis, 1999: 143) Thus, in order to integrate and assimilate with the white working-class community, Meena shifts positions within a 'liminal' spectrum and endeavours hard. It is important for her to "feel complete, to belong" and not merely be classed as a "foreigner" in the tiny village. In her opinion, "life outside the home" as the feisty Anita Rutter's friend, is her "passport to acceptance" (*A&M*, p148). However, in her attempts at integration the protagonist is caught in a series of binaries which she has to negotiate – life outside home and inside, opposition between two cultures – Indian or Asian culture and English or specifically the Black Country culture, Punjabi and English, clash of languages and gender differences. These oppositions position her in a space 'betwixt and between'.⁵⁸ This is also clearly consistent with what Branach-Kallas suggests as being a distinctive feature of the traditional diaspora:

The discourse of diaspora operates through exclusion and overemphasises difference, foregrounding the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' and constructing the other as an undifferentiated mass. Consequently, both the discourse of nationalism and of ethnicity constitute models of belonging that attempt to root the individual within a clearly defined homogenised group. (Branach-Kallas, 2004: 141)

⁵⁸ These gender and class differences impart in her an in-betweenness that is far more nuanced than Bhabha's notion and also refer to material issues that are ignored by him in his analysis of 'hybridity', highlighting its limitation as a dominant concept.

Although the feminist cultural theorist Avtar Brah suggests that there are significant differences within this homogenised group of each culture, whether British or Asian, the Indian or Asian culture is represented in Meena's life primarily in terms of her family and relatives, who are in reality Asian friends from a similar background, and who her parents have "readily renamed as family, faced with the loss of their own blood relations" (A&M, p31) within the imagined community of immigrants and with whom there is a rebuilding of kinship links. The English, on the other hand, are her neighbours and friends mainly concentrated in the small and insignificant ex-mining village of Tollington. Notwithstanding the fact that Brah postulates that "the emphasis on 'culture clash' disavows the possibility of cultural interaction and fusion", (Brah, 1996: 41) Syal's protagonist Meena forcibly undertakes the opposition of cultures and tries hard to achieve a cultural symbiosis through improvisation and compromise in spite of being aware of the differences between her family and the Tollington neighbourhood. Being a child, it is easier for Meena to seep into different spaces as she doesn't carry the baggage that her parents, being the first generation immigrants, have to contend with.

Descending from a family which upheld their Indian values and culture, she finds certain things awkward and unacceptable, yet tries to disregard and make adjustments to the best of her ability. She totally despises the "communal policing", being bossed around by "Aunties", who reprimand each other's children as a "sign of affection almost, that you cared enough about them to administer a pinch or nudge now and then" (A&M, p45), highlighting the different meanings associated with different cultures.

As an adult narrator reflecting on her childhood, Meena/Syal expresses her disapproval of hypocrisy of the Indian culture which make people behave in a certain artificial manner and possess complex rules of conduct –

..false modesty was an expected response to any social request, that 'No' always meant 'Yes', I want to really but you will have to ask me at least five times before I can give in graciously and not look like a big fat show-off. It applied to food, drink, money and especially public performances of any kind. (p112)

To Meena, the English seem far more forthright in comparison, uncomplicated and unpretentious. She admires the celebration of English Christmas, with everyone receiving “carloads of presents and the generally festive, communal atmosphere which overtook the village somewhere around late November and continued into January”. (p91) Diwali, on the other hand, the Hindu festival of light, is her substitute for Christmas but the festivity is muted in comparison with the English Christmas and nobody wishes her ‘Happy Diwali’. The enormity of cultural difference between the two communities is highlighted by Syal and the impact of these cultural signifiers on ‘belonging’ is underscored. Syal also reveals that in a hegemonic white society, Hindu/Asian festivals are not respected and in fact undermined. The ignorance of the white Tollington population towards the significance of cultural practices of minority ethnic communities is exposed by Syal making her novel sit uncomfortably with the multiculturalist thinking prevalent in Britain when Syal was writing in the 1990s.⁵⁹

In the novel, we are also informed that Meena adores English food like ‘Fish and Chips’ and harbours a romantic idea that all English families

⁵⁹ Syal is writing to a multicultural Britain about a prior history of ignorance, when immigrants were still new to the country.

have their meals “telling witty stories over the dinner table” unlike hers where her mother runs “to and fro from the kitchen burning fingers” making chapattis (p252). Like any child, Meena has a driving need to assimilate and belong and hence prefers ‘Fish and Chips’ over the traditional Indian food in spite of being aware of the significance of those dishes as sermonized by her mother:

This food is not just something to fill a hole, it was soul food, it was the food their far-away mothers made and came seasoned with memory and longing, this was the nearest they would get for many years, to home. (p61)

While on the one hand the disavowal of Indian food represents the overriding desire of Meena to integrate and succeed in her challenge of achieving a cultural symbiosis, Syal has a deeper message. The author suggests that these English dishes do not provide an emotional connection with the homeland that Indian food can foster. It may be said, that traditional Indian food represents the Kumars’ homing desire and a means of sustaining ties with their home in India. For first generation immigrants like Meena’s mother, living in a British society cut off from any physical ties with the homeland, sustenance can only be achieved through the emotional and metaphorical link of food. Being a child of the second generation, Meena does not feel this overwhelming need to maintain a connection with ‘home’ as she considers England as her home, marking her difference from her parents’ generation.

Instead, Meena finds herself occupying a precarious location, a ‘liminal’ position as I would like to call it, one which Victor Turner theorizes as an interstitial and transitional phase. She finds herself caught in that “in-

between space” which is simultaneously disabling and liberating.⁶⁰ What we perceive throughout is Meena’s struggle to cope with the complexity and ambiguities of a ‘liminal’ existence characteristic of new generation British-Asian identities. For a certain section of the novel, occupying a ‘liminal’ space reveals her inability to be fully accomplished in either culture, and her existence is instead marked by the “ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning” as argued by Turner. She is rendered a victim of cultural chaos, doubly alienated and a threat to the in-group/out-group distinction. However, the dialectics of opposition or contradiction paradoxically imparts a peculiar unity which though apparently disabling is in reality immensely enabling.

While Syal highlights this “in-betweenness”, on certain occasions, Meena considers this kind of existence as a “culturally disabling minefield”. She candidly reflects on her unique situation by articulating her thoughts:

I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench, but living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home. (p 149 – 150)

She is unable to undertake a smooth transition between the Indianness and Englishness, but is instead caught up, as Schoene-Harwood suggests, “in a never-ending series of only ever imperfectly accomplished processes of translation, which render her a foreign presence in the outside world as well as at home”. (Schoene-Harwood, 1999: 162) In this passage, we find the older narrator reflecting on Meena’s childhood difficulties with her position in

⁶⁰ Turner defines this in-between position as that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the individual is neither what he has been nor what he will be. Characteristic of this liminal period is the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning... (Turner, 1983: 113) However, I would like to focus on the spatial dimension of Turner’s concept rather than the temporal aspect as I argue that characters such as Meena can occupy perennial ‘multi-liminality’.

life, caught 'betwixt and between' one culture and another, unable to feel comfortable with her existence in one society or another, but finding comfort in the "grey area" in between. I would like to suggest that this is illustrative of the fact that home is more than just a place to reside; it is laden with connotations and associations such as a sense of belonging, to people, place and nation, things that render one's existence colourful. Meena's existence on the contrary is dominated by a 'greyness' that is not only reflected in her awkward positioning, but in the bleak surrounding landscape, in her parents' lamentation at the '*mehfils*' and the unattractive physical appearance of her parental home.

Meena's persistent struggle is starkly manifest when she sings at her parent's' Indian parties, and is herself cognisant "that there was a corner of me that would be forever not England" (A&M, p112), but ironically Auntie Shaila points out that Meena "sings Punjabi with a Birmingham accent" (p114). The last comment encapsulates Meena's 'liminality'. The complexity of her existence is conspicuous in her inability to identify herself as English due to the awareness of her Indian roots and yet her surroundings, the Midlands, is an inextricable part of her. What Meena is striving for in the novel is not only to achieve an integration and assimilation of two cultures in the society in which she resides, a trend that dominates contemporary discourse of multiculturalism, but is also negotiating her own 'liminal' existence at the same time. This shift in focus from integration/assimilation to negotiation makes the novel far more important and interesting than any other contemporary piece of work. While the ideologies of assimilation and negotiation are both dominated by dialogue and interaction, negotiation is a

more democratic process negating the supremacy of any one culture. Collective advantage is given precedence as both sides are equally affected; in this case the white English culture and Asian culture. I would like to suggest, that while negotiation is desirable and achievable, assimilation is not always necessary and is harder to attain. Moreover, the absence of any fixed identity makes negotiation more appropriate for Meena than assimilation, although the former is not always a smooth affair.⁶¹

According to Turner, 'liminality' is characterised by merging and blurring of distinctions. Persons who find themselves in a liminal phase are "temporarily undefined, beyond normative social structure. This weakens them since they have no rights over others. This also liberates them from structural obligations." (Turner, 1983) Such liberation is empowering as it endows the 'liminal' individual with power and agency to explore different possibilities. "Consequently", as pointed out by Branach-Kallas in an essay on the novel, "like Kureishi in *My Beautiful Launderette* and the *Rainbow Sign* or Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*, Syal makes us reconsider the in-between space occupied by the diasporic subject as a site of exceptional creativity". (Branach-Kallas, 2004: 144) Hence we find, Syal's precocious nine-year old protagonist – narrator rejecting any notion of fixity. Possessing an astute insight into the dynamics of the two cultures enables Meena to keenly perceive the "dividing line between relationships with other Indian families and the British". (Davis, 1999: 142) Dunphy accurately

⁶¹ In this regard it is important to note that Bhabha often emphasises that agency is a form of negotiation. (Bhabha, 1994: 25,38) However, there is a crucial flaw in Bhabha's argument. As Benita Parry points out, in his analysis of the relationship between materiality and agency, Bhabha neglects considering the limits that material inequality can impose on negotiation. (Parry, 1996: 21) Moreover, in his analysis, Bhabha does not provide a social context nor takes it into account in his theory. Such inadequacy further validates my perception of Meena as a 'liminal' construction rather than a 'hybrid' entity.

remarks, that “standing above and apart from both, allows her to observe both the English and Indians from a distanced perspective, and she can be poignantly humorous about both”. (Dunphy, 2004: 650) Therefore, while standing outside and looking in, Syal’s protagonist is able to comprehend the passive resignation of the Tollington women, characterized by “a stoic muscular resistance which made them ask for nothing and expect less”, and can juxtapose it against the active acceptance of the Indian Aunties who “put everything down to the will of Bhagwan, their Karma, their just deserts inherited from their last incarnation which they had to live through and solve with grace and dignity” (*A&M*, p67). This opposition of the binaries of passive resignation and active acceptance as a reflection of their culture, class and gender provides Meena with different perceptions of the models of femininity and the way in which they deal with their destiny.⁶²

Meena is also able to analyse the subtle nuances of the difference between the two cultures Indian and English, an illustration of which is found in her understanding of the fact that while going “out” for the English people meant an occasion to interact socially away from home, in case of her family, it meant going to their Indian friend’s’ houses which in her opinion “was always ‘in’ as all we would do was to sit in each others’ lounges, eat each others’ food and watch each others’ television”. (p25) It is shocking for her to come to terms with the reality that for the entire tenure of their stay in Tollington, when “every weekend was taken up with visiting Indian families or being invaded by them”, while “only once had any of our neighbours been

⁶² It is evident to Meena that while the white working-class women are resigned to their patience and endurance in order to contend with their lives, the traditional Indian women rely on religion and their fate for survival in a hegemonic white society.

invited in further than the step of our back door” (p29). Thus, despite living and being part of the yard, the question of belonging is still potent; the distance and division between the two cultures is unmistakable.

The role of memory is also a key factor influencing Meena’s attempt to grapple with the question of belonging. She is astutely aware that she cannot reject her Indian heritage and the common past that she shares with other immigrants, yet feels “jealous of this past that (has) excluded” her. (p36) The awareness is overpowering especially on occasions when her father conducts his ‘*mehfils*’ and sings traditional devotional or love songs that bring back vivid memories of the ‘home’. This awareness of ‘difference’ is confirmed by Satchidanandan’s assertion that, “the experience of the second generation ... migrant is very different from that of the first generation migrant: home becomes unreal to them, just a space of imagination rather than of nostalgic recollection”. (Satchidanandan, 2001: 19) Thus this ‘home’ is a space of imagination, something which Meena feels unfamiliar with, yet feels unconsciously part of:

Papa’s singing always unleashed these emotions which were unfamiliar and instinctive at the same time, in a language I could not recognize but I felt I could speak in my sleep, in my dreams, evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. (A&M, p112)

As a second-generation migrant, Meena has to cope with a tremendous confusion of identities and find her own place within them. For her, the unfamiliar can become familiar only through the work of imagination as pointed out by Satchidanandan.

Memory is also used by Syal as a tool to re-tell the story of migration of Meena’s parents, the colonial history of the British Raj and the legacy left

behind by British imperialism. In the Prologue to the novel, Meena claims herself being “deprived of history” and in the course of the story she confesses being troubled by a “sense of displacement” which she “always carried around like a curse” (p303). To resolve this, we find her questioning her mother about the reasons behind their displacement and migration. Daljit elucidates through her explanation that in the aftermath of the Partition in 1947, accessing higher education had become expensive in India and people’s success was impeded by existing poverty. Desiring a better future for themselves and their children prompted the decision for uprooting: “That’s why we had to leave, we were poor and clever, a bad combination in India” (p212). The British Raj had left its indelible mark on people of the subcontinent, and Meena’s familiarity with such stories grew not as a result of history lessons at school but as a result of the recollections that her parents had of the incidents from their homeland. Thus in spite of not having access to her roots at first hand, she had access to them through her family who had witnessed and been a part of the history that eludes her.

The colonial background to immigration into Britain is frequently referenced in the novel, especially in the passages on events surrounding the Partition of the subcontinent.⁶³ We learn that Shyam, Meena’s father, was brought up in Lahore which is part of today’s Pakistan and was forced to flee to India due to sectarian fighting which erupted after the division of the

⁶³ The struggle for independence in colonial India had led to the formation of two new nations in 1947, partitioned not merely territorially but through religion – into a predominantly Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. The Muslim dominated provinces of Western Punjab and East Bengal formed West and East Pakistan respectively, while India remained squeezed in the middle. The process involved mass migration between the new nations and the crossing of borders incited violence and terror among the displaced population. Atrocities on men, women and children were rife and led to the death of millions. Later in 1971, Pakistan was again torn into two countries, resulting in the birth of Bangladesh and the nation of Pakistan as they exist today.

borders were announced. All the other Aunties and Uncles had similar 'shared histories' in relation to the Partition which were recounted during gatherings at their home. Collective bereavement took place at the musical evenings (*'mehfils'*), when Meena remembers Uncle Bhatnagar's outcry: "But it was a damn massacre! ... they talk about their world wars ... We lost a million people! And who thought of the Partition? These 'gores,' that's who!" (p73) She also notices Aunt Mumtaz, recollecting the terror from a Muslim woman's perspective:

My Mother and I, the Hindus marched us through the streets ... our heads uncovered ... They wanted to do such things to us All the time we were walking, mama and I, papa was lying dead, his head cut from his body. They found it later lying in the fallen jasmine blooms...(p73)

The common experience and helplessness is summarised by Uncle Bhatnagar: "We all have these stories, bhainji ... what was happening to you was also happening to us. None of us could stop it". (p73) The enormous psychological effect of the Partition looms large among such diasporic individuals and they are confronted with a loss of their roots – both cultural and geographical - forcing them to follow a different route, of migration into Britain; roots twice lost. Recounting such loss of lives, dishonour and oppression enables Meena to realise that these memories of the past for her parents is not simply a "sentimental journey" but was "a murky bottomless pool full of monsters ... a deceptively still surface and a deadly undercurrent" from which she is excluded. (p75) Kabir explains this memorial recall of 'cultural trauma' using the concept of 'postmemory' but qualifies it to connect with this specific context.⁶⁴ She contends that this "postmemory belongs to

⁶⁴ Kabir relies on Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory' defined as "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated

neither the public nor the personal sphere, but to an alternative community space that is somewhere in between: a reconstituted Punjabianness that exists behind closed suburban doors". (Kabir, 2004) I argue that by sharing the space of 'reconstituted Punjabianness' created during the '*mehfils*' not only makes it easier for Meena to reconcile with this 'postmemory', but also grapple with her 'liminal' existence.

What also becomes apparent through these discussions is that irrespective of their religious background, the image of 'home'/'India' is the same for older generation migrants despite underlying differences. There is also a reassertion of Avtar Brah's contention that there are several distinctions within a particular culture and it is especially true in case of India where there are different religions, languages, castes and sub-cultures within one nation. What we find in the novel therefore, is Syal disrupting the notion of a monolithic Asian community. By talking about India, what the Indian community in the novel implies, is in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, a "metonym' because uttering the word India, we do not mean the 792 million people" (Spivak, 1990) but refers to India as an imagined community of people sharing similar experiences and sentiments. This may also be seen connecting with Britain as an 'imagined nation' where British Asians are connected with each other through their 'shared histories' and common experiences .

stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor create ... a space of remembrance, more broadly available through cultural and public, and not merely individual and personal, acts of remembrance, identification and projection". (Hirsch, 1999)

Meena's Nanima is a significant figure in her connection with the past and her memorial recollections of the colonial era in India enable Meena to engage with the history that elides her. Through her story-telling to Meena, Nanima recollects the British soldiers stealing the family's chickens and arresting her husband for refusing to fight on behalf of the British army. The stark contrast between her family's version of the colonial history and the shameful images of Indian servility during British imperialism conveyed during history lessons on 'India' in her school surprises Meena. This feeling of astonishment is compounded when a neighbour, Mr. Topsy (Mr. Turvey in reality), who had served in India for ten years as part of the colonial army candidly confesses: "We should never have been there. Criminal it was! Ugly". (A& M, p222)

The complexity and the problem of belonging are further exacerbated by the language barrier which halts Meena at every step of her connection with her roots. Language has posed a perennial problem for all migrant communities and perhaps more so in the British Asian context.⁶⁵ In Meena's case, the conflict between mother-tongue vs. English, the majority language in Britain is evidenced. Being well educated, both her parents have always spoken in English to aid their own integration into the white working-class community, thereby depriving her of the opportunity of learning their mother-

⁶⁵ There have been several studies conducted among various ethnic communities in Birmingham, and the language problem has emerged as a major barrier either in case of integration or in case of achieving biculturalism. See Gurbachan Singh, *Language, Race and Education*, Jaysons (Birmingham), 1988; *The Case of Punjabi Sikhs in Britain*, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick; Rachel Warner, *Bangladesh is my Motherland: A Case Study of Bengali and English Language Development and Use Among a Group of Bengali Pupils in Britain*, Minority Rights Group (London), 1992. This has also been a recent topic for political debate where the government has insisted that all ethnic communities must speak more English to aid the process of integration and the ex-Home Secretary David Blunkett has written an essay on this issue.

tongue Punjabi. In fact, they strategically use their native language in order to conceal a secret or when criticising their English neighbours. It is like an “indoor language”, which according to Meena,

elders would only share away from the prying English eyes and ears When they wanted to say something intimate, personal, about feelings as opposed to acquisitions, they switched to Punjabi and the volume became a conspiratorial whisper. (p203)

There is thus a distinct ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ divide in terms of the use of language by her parents and relatives creating a circle of exclusivity and being unable to speak this native tongue, deprives Meena of a secret weapon when it comes to tackling the crude and hardened inhabitants of Tollington.

Apart from her handicap due to lack of knowledge of Punjabi, the grave outcome of this deficiency is Meena’s inability to communicate with her Nanima, who only speaks Punjabi. While this lack of communication creates literal problems for Meena, it has metaphorical implications. Ability to communicate with her Nanima also provides connection with her roots from which she has remained estranged. Gaps in her identity can only be filled through her language acquisition. On one occasion, her father points out its relevance to her existence: “You really must learn Punjabi, Meena. Look how left out you feel. How will you ever understand your Nanima, huh?”(p205). As their relationship develops, Meena’s interest in India is stimulated leading to a wish that she could speak in Punjabi and understand the various nuances of their culture about which she has remained unaware. It is primarily due to obstacles created by language that Meena struggles to embrace her duality whereas her friends or cousins, Pinky and Baby, having the backing of

language, find it easier to contend with their multiplicity. It is apparent that in this novel Syal depicts the primacy of language and the empowerment of migrant communities through the use of a common native language to negotiate existence in a hegemonic white Britain.

Victor Turner has suggested that the 'liminal' state can be ordered through the performance of ritual, however, I would like to suggest through my concept of 'multi-liminality' that the 'liminal' state can be ordered by undertaking journeys along the 'liminal spectrum'. Such a journey provides the possibility of standing aside from one's own social position and formulating a series of alternative social arrangements. In order to negotiate her sense of incompleteness, Meena crosses the 'threshold' by cultivating her friendship with the thirteen year old Anita Rutter, the undisputed leader of the children in the yard. Labelled as "the undisputed 'cock'" of the yard, Anita is the "passport to acceptance" (p148) and Meena feels "privileged to be in her company" (p38). Above all, her friend Anita is the epitome of the Black Country culture in Meena's young eyes. With her "foghorn voice, foul mouth, and proficiency at lassoing victims" (p38-39), she makes Meena feel "taller and sharper and ready to try anything".(p53) The friendship between the two girls is a pivotal theme in the novel and has far-reaching consequences in Meena's quest for her self.

In the early sections of the novel, Meena is plagued by a sense of incompleteness and perceives herself as being a "bad girl, a mixed-up girl, a girl with no name or place", troubled by a "sense of displacement" she "always carried around like a curse".(p303) Venturing into the 'public' realm by undertaking a life of fantasy she tries to make sense of her multiple and

disordered self. Her acceptance as part of Anita's gang is an assurance for Meena of her English self. For a significant part of the novel, she embraces the English working-class culture and rejects her traditional Indian upbringing, the kind of 'separation' theorised by Van Gennep. Becoming a regular member of the 'Wenches Brigade', marks a symbolic journey, facilitating Meena's transition between her multiple positionalities. She gallivants around their 'kingdom', stealing sweets from shops, offending adults, reading perverted magazines and discussing boys and sex.

In *A&M*, Syal destabilises the dominant constructions of gender through the friendship between the girls. Recognising a "kindred spirit" in Anita, liberated from all normative constraints, Meena's admiration for her friend flows spontaneously: "Anita made [her] laugh like no one else" and their friendship enables her to give "voice to all the wicked things [she] had often thought but kept zipped up inside [her] good girl's winter coat".(p138) The pleasant, docile manners of her 'cousins' Pinky and Baby, stereotypical good Indian girls, are rejected in favour of an untamed unknown experience by Meena. Anita educates her about sex, narrating tales about boys in her school "who all panted after her madly" and bought her "stuff". Anita even explains to her "the facts of life" through the tantalisingly corny lyrics of the Judge Dredd record, putting her off having babies: "I ain't never gonna have babies" she discloses to Anita, "Not like that anyway".(p144) In her desperate attempt at winning Anita's heart and exploring the other end of the spectrum, Meena also exaggerates her Black Country accent intermittently, so that Meena could tell that Anita "was impressed with the authentic yard accent". (p122)

On the other hand, not all the revelations about Anita are quite so enchanting, as Meena discovers a malicious and unpleasant side of her friend who she idolised. Possessing awareness of being an outsider, it is easy for Meena to identify the weak but surprisingly, she makes no resistance, simply watching such incidents with a “sickening complicity”. It exposes to her -

how in an instant, those you called friends could suddenly become tormentors, sniffing out a weakness or a difference, turning their own fear of ostracism into a weapon with which they could beat the victim away, afraid that being an outsider, an individual even, was somehow infectious. (p142)

Nevertheless, being in Anita’s company makes Meena feel like an adult, while her Indian friends Pinky and Baby appear immature. In order to experience an English life to the full, Meena shifts spaces and engages in a joint venture with Anita. Stealing sweets from Mr. Ormerod’s shop and imperturbably passing on the blame to her so-called cousins without a prick of conscience, such acts of deception and betrayal paradoxically evokes praise from Anita, who sees Meena as a “joint leader with me now if yow want,....of our gang. Want to?” The prospect of this thrills Meena as it is like a fulfilment of her dreams – “I had finally broken free ... I felt my chest expand as if each rib had been a prison barleaving my heart unfettered and drunk with space”(p 156). Becoming an equal partner in Anita’s gang, finally confirms for her how different she was to her Indian peers. It “reaffirmed” for her, that she “was nothing like them, never would be them” (p 158). What we witness here is that the initial anxiety resulting from this condition is balanced by exhilaration in the freedom that it affords, making it

a simultaneously disabling and enabling experience.⁶⁶ It is also a moment of breakdown of the negotiation that Meena has been essaying in the course of the novel to tackle the question of belonging. In this instance, she has to betray something from her own community in order to be accepted by the English.

However, it would be a mere simplification to consider Anita as being purely a “bad” influence on Meena. Engaging in this ritual process and through exposure to difference, Meena is attempting to grapple with complex issues affecting her own self. She has deliberately desired this influence so that she can project her own fantasies and frustrations onto Anita, thereby enabling her to overcome her own insecurities. The erotic fancy between the two pre-pubescent girls brings to the fore the tension between her inner and outer self, feminine and masculine aspects which gain prominence with the emergence of adolescence. The ‘Anita saga’ comes to a denouement when Meena first sees herself as the English girl’s equal and she arrives at the realisation that perhaps “she (Anita) needed me maybe more than I needed her”.(p242) When she finally does reject Anita, their friendship remains an episode in her growing-up process where she is turning back on a part of her self. Dunphy perceptively notes, that “Anita is for Meena a kind of *alter ego*, personifying things which she is working through in her own life”. (Dunphy, 2004: 643) Although this exposure to difference – racial and sexual - remains inchoate, it forms a significant aspect of Meena’s development physically, emotionally and psychologically. Traversing “through different dimensions”

⁶⁶ This emphasis on freedom and regeneration manifests an expansion of the original conception of ‘liminality’ making ‘multi-liminality’ a broader and more encompassing concept.

enables Meena to undergo a transformation suggested by Van Gennep and to overcome victimisation.

What we also witness in this novel is a shifting of spaces by Meena in the process of her friendship with Anita. In *Writing Women and Space*, Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose discuss the “different ways in which feminists have seen space as central both to masculinist power and to the feminist resistance”. This idea is explicated through the anthropologist Shirley Ardener’s theory which focuses:

on the difference between the genders and argued that the ‘social map’ of patriarchy created ‘ground rules’ for the behaviour of men and women, and that the gender roles and relations of patriarchy constructed some spaces as ‘feminine’ and others as ‘masculine’ and this allocated certain kinds of (gendered) activities to certain (gendered) places. Gender difference was thus seen as inscribing spatial difference. (Blunt & Rose, 1994)

The distinction between spaces is also theorized by the anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo who perceived the distinction between the private and public space as being “fundamental to the universal oppression of women”. (Blunt & Rose, 1994) In her essay in 1974, Rosaldo defined ‘private’ space, or as she termed it, the ‘domestic’ space, as the place of women while the ‘public’ was the realm of culture, politics, and economy and therefore viewed as the sphere of men.

In *A&M*, we find an exemplification of Meena traversing between different spaces which are perhaps an outcome of being a migrant situated within the community of the ‘Other’. Coming from an Indian background, Meena is expected to abide by the conventions of being ‘feminine’, and hence occupy the private space. However, being a deviant from the norm, she is constantly at the receiving end of comments like – “Why behave like a

boy all the time? ...Stand with your legs together ... Why don't you grow your hair, do you want to be a boy, Meena?" (*A&M*, p30) She is a stark contrast to her mother, who is an epitome of Indian femininity, a traditional occupier of the 'domestic' space – "slender, delicate soft-voiced women with the sloe-eyed grace captured by the Mughal miniature paintings" (p110). In spite of her endeavour, Meena is "lumbering and clumsy", and feels that her body betrays her "by making [her] stand with [her] legs akimbo, hands on hips, the way it tripped [her] up into the dirt, skinning [her] knees – it was never meant to behave like the body of a lady". (p111)

Hence Meena has no hesitation in navigating herself towards the 'public' space, entering the fantasy world being the feisty Anita Rutter's friend away from her parents, family and her home. In Anita she recognises a "kindred spirit", a reflection of another "mad bad girl trapped inside a superficially obedient body". (p150) Her adventure at the fairground amidst the flashing lights, going on the head-spinning and 'stomach-churning' rides unaccompanied by adults, unlawful entry into the prohibited land – the Big House gardens, touring round the Tollington streets, relaxing in the dirt 'yard', are all instances of her venturing the public space which are traditionally the domain of the men, the outside world, far removed from the home where she is supposed to restrict herself. Undertaking journeys into the public space also manifests the tension within Meena between her inner and outer self, feminine and masculine which gains prominence with the emergence of adolescence, as well as the conflict between being Indian and English. It is this capacity to move "through different dimensions" and work through things by herself that enables Meena to overcome victimization and

find a new modality of being. It also validates the feminist theorist Hélène Cixous's view, "Being several and insubordinable, the subject can resist subjugation". (Cixous, 1974: 387)

In spite of her sincere efforts, what Meena fails to escape from, is what Frantz Fanon has referred to in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* as "the fact of blackness". (Fanon, 1986) Both she and her family are indelibly marked with visual markers of difference which she neither can hide nor abscond from. What is even more deep-seated is her bodily self-consciousness. It is not surprising therefore that after her frenzied writing to the agony-aunts about problems with her appearance and even receiving a reply, she is forced to resign to the desire: "to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and unrecognisable." (A&M, p146) Such response is akin to what Fanon calls the black subject's 'heightened bodily self-consciousness' which makes them encounter the feeling of being "overdetermined from without". An overpowering sense of "I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" engulfs them. (Fanon, 1995: 325) Meena thus develops an intense dislike for herself and decides to avoid the mirror, which sometimes provides a distorted image of the Self, a negative doppelganger. She begins to demonstrate what Schoene-Harwood explains to be the "symptoms of a self-mutilating anorexic who has given in to the normative regime of an internalized gaze which, in this case, is of a racist rather than sexist order". (Schoene-Harwood, 1999: 162) This pressure of racial difference is not easily alleviated in Meena's case. In fact it is heightened when she and her

friends meet the boys at the fair, and Meena finds herself being judged and emerges somewhat lacking in measure:

He came to rest on me, took in the winter coat, the scabbed knees, my stubborn nine-year old face, and dismissed me with amusement and, yes, relief. He had not got the short straw after all and I knew that it was not because I was too young or badly dressed, it was something else, something about me so offputting, so unimaginable, that I made Fat Sally look like the glittering prize. (A&M, p105)

At first Meena is left confused, feeling ugly and rejected, but it is only when she has confronted the colour-question directly, that she appears to find her own equilibrium. Later in the novel, when she is in the hospital and develops a relationship with a boy named Robert, that her identity is truly judged by a stranger – “Ey up, Yow’m a real Midland wench, ur Meena! I thought you’d sound a bit more exotic than this!”(p291) The restoration of the sagging self-confidence and maturity when coping with Robert’s death, are crucial steps in the process of her liberation from the shackles of a fractured identity and a sense of incompleteness. It is also the kind of re-assimilation suggested by Van Gennep marking the end of the symbolic journey.

With a renewed self-confidence, Meena no longer has the “continual compulsion to fabricate, this ever-present desire to be someone else in some other place far from Tollington” (p211) because she realises and accepts who she really is and where her home truly lies. She can rest in the comfort of the knowledge that “The place in which she belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home”. (p303) I would like to suggest that it is as if Meena has discovered for herself, a ‘third space’ possessing the unity of the ‘liminal’; which is “neither this, nor that and yet is both”. (Turner, 1967:

99) No longer torn between two worlds, two cultures, she possesses a sense of freedom and unity enabling her to shift spaces within the 'liminal' spectrum and use her difference as an advantage. Thus, after Sam's confession – "Yow've always been the best wench in Tollington", Meena knows she has won. (*A&M*, p314) She is never going to be inferior to anyone, no longer remain a powerless victim.⁶⁷ Finally after her statement to the police, she realises it is "time to let go" – and feels as if she has "floated back down in my body, which for the first time ever, fitted me to perfection and was all mine". (p 326) Eventually, Meena takes a positive step by choosing a good education in favour of the narrow-minded racism and superficiality of Tollington, ending the novel on an optimistic note.

Ultimately Meena has to disavow the working class culture of the Tollington villagers in favour of the middle-class culture of the urban community. She is ready to move forward with the help of better education without feeling incomplete or a stranger to herself. Through Meena's identity formation, Syal is making the point that for a British Asian subject to succeed, they have to prove themselves better than their English peers and challenge their apparent racial inferiority with educational and cultural superiority. Growing up as an immigrant child is underscored as a highly complex process as they not only have to deal with the usual hardships, they also have to come to terms with their difference and meet the high expectations invested in them by their parents.

⁶⁷ Once again we find that Meena's construction differs from characteristic 'hybridity' which does not provide the freedom to journey back and forth between different social contexts and positions and explore different possibilities.

The 'liminality' of Meena's predicament indicates a move beyond what Gloria Anzaldúa theorises as the 'mestiza consciousness' a straddling between two cultures drawing on each, but belonging to neither.⁶⁸ In her acceptance of a 'liminal' identity, Meena feels empowered and able to break free of the wounds that have long tormented her and experience freedom, regeneration and renewal. 'Liminality' in itself can be an abstract concept and accrues meaning only when one accepts the differences of body, race, culture and class, which we witness in case of the protagonist at the end of the novel. In the concluding section she is content, not willing to "mourn too much the changing landscape" as she is aware that she can survive in any given location reaffirming Van Gennep and Turner's assertion of a 'liminal' existence being characterised by multiple meanings, ambiguity and "fluid boundary-crossings", not merely being restricted within any "totalizing boundaries". (Bhabha, 1994: 149) Meena's 'liminality' can be viewed as paradigmatic of many new generation British Asian women's existence where diverse identities are constantly in the process of transformation, reasserting my argument that 'multi-liminality' is a far more inclusive and nuanced concept, capturing the uniqueness and heterogeneity of new generation multi-ethnic Britons in relation to Bhabha's 'hybridity'.

Ruvani Ranasingha summarises that "[*Anita and Me*] explore[s] the different generations' relationship to the 'host' and 'home' countries, and the impact on identity-formation of their contrasting formative experiences".

⁶⁸ Anzaldúa postulates that "at some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somewhat healed so that we are on both shores at once, and at once see through the serpent and the eagle eyes". (Anzaldúa, 1987: 78)

(Ranasinha, 2007: 224) While agreeing with her, I would like to argue that the novel focuses more on how the second or new generation Britons negotiate their existence in a Britain which they consider as their home. The impact of their experiences on their identity formations may be better understood by using a 'liminal spectrum' where they may be seen to occupy different phases of 'separation', 'transition' and 're-assimilation' at any given point in time.

Written in the 1990s, when 'multiculturalism' was coming of age, there is a reshaping of memory in *A&M*, revealed through the sharpness of focus on cultural issues and of women's position at home, in the community and the nation. Moreover, in the novel we find an exploration of the whole idea of remembering, where the past is reconstructed through memory, both individual and cultural. By engaging in such processes of reconstructing and remembering, the novel is taking a position on how difficult it is for new generation Britons to negotiate their complex existence.

Life isn't all ha ha hee hee

Meera Syal's second novel *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (Syal, 2000) is a comic novel constructed around the lives of three new generation British-Asian women who have been childhood friends and explore the possibilities of living differently in the suburban London location of the East End. Like her previous novel, cultural identity of the British-Asian subject is brought into question by Syal through her three female protagonists - Sunita, Tania and Chila. However, unlike *Anita and Me*, *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee* (henceforth

referred to as *Life*) is not set in suburban Midlands. Instead the novel provides an interesting perspective of British-Asian life in the East End of London, located in the suburbs beyond the 'centre' of London. It is a construction of the British Asian subject from an alternative perspective and provides a contrast to the narrative fictionalised in suburban Midlands. Syal's peripheral upbringing inflects her representation of London, casting her eye away from the fictional Tollington of the Midlands to the migrant ghettos of the East End. Moreover, unlike Syal's previous novel which appeared on the literary scene at a moment when there was a craving for new voices, Syal's second novel arrived when this urgency had perhaps faded slightly.

For a Midlands writer like Syal, *Life* is a big leap away from the suburbs of Birmingham towards the suburbs of London. She has located her novel at the literal and metaphorical confluence of two working class communities, British and Asian, a border simultaneously joining the Eastenders to the Eastern-Enders on the one hand and separating their distinctiveness on the other. Therefore, on one side of the road we find auto-part shops and McDonald's, and on the other there is "Kamla's Chiffons and the beginning of two miles of sweet emporiums, café-dhabas, opulent jewellers and surprisingly expensive Asian fashion boutiques" making it possible to "stand with a foot in each world". (*Life*, p40) Similar to the physical location of the novel, its characters too straddle two cultures, Asian and British and are caught "betwixt and between", a situation akin to

Nazneen in Ali's *Brick Lane*.⁶⁹ They seem to be located at the threshold between one world and another, standing at the overlap of the two.

Writing, like other forms of cultural production by black and Asian Britons has become an important site for exploring the position of minority communities in contemporary Britain and articulating new forms of identity that have been emerging as a result of the sociological changes. It marks a shift in trend from the writers of the post-war generation. What is distinctive about this generation points out Ranasinha is that these writers like Syal "act as cultural translators, in their mediations between majority and minority communities, rather than between countries". (Ranasinha, 2007: 221) Moreover, the Black British literary critic Chris Weedon claims:

Fiction, like autobiographies, diaries, and letters, has long been a powerful mode for exploring patriarchal relations and for articulating questions of women's subjectivity and identities as they are formed by and in resistance to social relations that are often racist, ethnocentric, and shaped by class and heterosexism. (Weedon, 2008: 19)

Syal's novel *Life* is a testament to this fact as it explores patriarchal relations along with questions of identity and belonging similar to other new generation black and Asian British writers. Unlike first generation migrant novels focusing on dislocation, poverty and racism, the new generation black and Asian writing concentrates more centrally on questions of identity and belonging, the former formed by and in resistance to prevailing social relations. Developing their work from the platform established by their predecessors, new generation women writers manifest an ideological assimilation to the dominant and hegemonic notions of multiculturalism and

⁶⁹ In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, her protagonist Nazneen is situated in the Bangladeshi community of East London, a confluence of English – Bangladeshi society.

consequently, their concerns have thus moved away from dissidence to assimilation. There is thus a shift in focus from race and class to identity and belonging. These writers consider Britain as their 'home', hence dislocation does not feature in their writing to the same extent. Kwame Dawes argues: "They were born there or have grown up there all their life. They are uncomfortable with the notion of a home elsewhere for they have no sense of exile". (Dawes, 2005: 261) For these new generation writers who consider themselves British, questions of identity have gained further precedence in the context of devolved Britain where there are ongoing struggles to redefine 'Britishness'. Questions about identity have also been exacerbated by the fact that there is a change in the demographic make-up of Britain that has resulted in large-scale inward migration and globalisation, thereby placing cultural diversity on the cultural political agenda. (Parekh, 2000)

Written mainly as a third person narrative with individual chapters allocated to each of the three protagonists who write in the first person, *Life* is centrally concerned with cultural and generational differences and provides an insightful perspective on gender relationships within the Asian community. In her novel, Syal uses realist writing strategies that Weedon argues "privilege a humanism that both evokes the negative effects of racism on individuals and stresses shared experiences across cultural differences", creating a space "for the imaginative exploration of experience as it is lived by racialized individuals and social groups and of the possibilities of living differently". (Weedon, 2008: 19) Her fluid writing style is cloaked in warm humour, punctuated with a curious mix of hilarious wit and poignancy, and on occasions interposed with beautiful poetic language. Being a comic actress

herself, in the novel, Syal paints a satirical portrait of the lives of new generation British Asian women against the background of ethnic diversity and explores the punchline “Life isn’t all ha ha hee hee” through themes of friendship, love, marriage and betrayal providing universality to the narrative.⁷⁰

Life opens with the wedding of Chila and Deepak on a winter’s day, engaging in a Turner-esque ritual and symbolic journey undertaken by two characters in the novel in an effort to make sense of their disordered selves. Performance of a ceremony, a social ritual, contends Turner, enables one to cross the ‘threshold’ and embark on a journey that is marked by a release from all normative constraints, a status ‘where anything can happen’. (Turner, 1969) Since my conception of ‘liminality’ focuses more on the spatial dimension of Turner’s theory, I perceive the wedding as a crossing of the threshold and undertaking of a symbolic journey along the ‘liminal spectrum’ rather than the performance of a ritual. Syal’s protagonist Chila, popularly referred to as “Poor Chila” and “Dark Dumbo” both within and outside her community, is characterised by an innocence which was mistaken by both her parents and educationalists as ‘stupidity’ in her childhood. Her parents went through phases of naming her “slow, then thick, then sweet” before concluding resignedly that she was “unmarriageable” to modern boys. (*Life*, p20) A recent émigré from East Africa, Chila was perfunctorily cast off by her school with the ‘Special’ needs children in a prefabricated hut, assuming that she knew no English and therefore assigned only mindless cutting and

⁷⁰ Similar satirical portrayal of British-Asian characters is found in Syal’s comedy sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me* where both British and Asian characters are satirised through vignettes from everyday life in Britain.

pasting activities. She only gained recognition from the other students, namely her friends Sunita and Tania, after she had won an essay competition in school. The latter adopted the “cinnamon smiling girl” as their friend and discovered that she was in fact “funnier, sweeter and kinder than anyone else knew”. (p20)

Friendship emerges as the central theme in the novel and formed a closely guarded, solid and unadulterated relation between the girls. Unlike Meena’s friendship with Anita in Syal’s previous novel, the three protagonists in *Life* are tied together in a unique bond, whose potency though weakened over time is never destroyed. In fact, it is the power of the friendship between the three women that enables them to negotiate the ambiguities and complexities of their existence. Through her teenage years, Chila lived under the protection of her friends, who helped her retain her world the way she wanted: “small, tiny and hoovered”. (p34) It was only after they moved on to university that she felt the need to fly the ‘nest’ and make something of her life. Her comfortable existence is short-lived however, as she is forced to give up her job following her engagement with Deepak.

Hailing from a wealthy Asian business-family, “dreamboat” Deepak or ‘Deeps’ as he is endearingly called, is portrayed as a young business tycoon, very conscious of his class and status within society. True to being a stereotypical dominant patriarch and social high-flier, it is ignominious for his ‘fiancé’ to work in a supermarket while his business-partners’ wives are engaged in arranging charity functions in aid of third-world disasters. He is the conventional Indian man who has chosen to settle for an arranged marriage with a traditional Punjabi bride. By choosing an unusual “plump

darkie with a shy stammer” as his bride, Deepak shocked and amazed his parents at once, who had endured “a parade of blonde trollops” throughout his youth. (p14) In a study, Modood *et al* comment that “Most second-generation Asians were cautious about engaging in relationship that would take them away from their cultural roots” and a similar idea appears to have framed Deepak’s decision. (Modood, 1994) The choice was also an effort to “belong”, to fit into the category of being “Western enough to be trendy and Indian enough to be pukka”. (*Life*, p37) In fact, he seemingly harbours the conservative and stereotypical belief that the arranged “marriage was rebirth for him, a cleansing away of his sorry past, all his karmic junk thrown into the holy fire ...”. (p67) Through Deepak, Syal romanticises the whole episode, as if the dashing man in distress has been rescued by the ordinary damsel inverting and destabilising all conventional stereotypes of women being rescued by men. What is couched within this hyperbolic and satirical rendition is the facade of goodness and nicety adorning most stereotypical Indian men, that is in reality a mask that is exposed as life unfolds.

Chila is not as uni-dimensional as she is commonly perceived to be nor the stereotypical Asian woman who is “passive, static and incapable of change”. (Khan, 1976) Her representation is apparently misleading. Like the image of the sari-clad Jayaben Desai, Chila is ostensibly incapable of courage and agency. Although she snugly fits into the stereotype of a traditional Indian bride, we see occasional flashes of her ‘other’ self which otherwise remains submerged under the veil of naivety and innocence. While on the one hand she enjoys being the submissive and dutiful wife, “seeing him off with a kiss and his briefcase”, renouncing employment, maintaining

an immaculate home, all in keeping with the stereotypical image of the Asian woman as a meek and passive agent; on the other hand, she has the depth of character to be aware that things that are genuine and everlasting are love and friendship, while everything else is superficial and transitory. (*Life*, p37) Chila is also cognisant that clinging on to tradition may be comforting: “Some of the old rules hold you up” she muses. (p33) It is important for her to distinguish values and traditions that are to be upheld and adhered, and those to discard, since it is these which have the potential to provide necessary sustenance in life. Such contradiction bestows upon her a unique unity that gives rise to agency and power. The true strength of her personality and agency is evident in the latter stages of the novel when she undergoes a sea-change by shifting spaces in quest of her true self.

Sunita, Syal’s second protagonist is constructed as an educated, intellectual and spirited young woman submerged under the weight of motherhood and domesticity. “Sunny” as she is known to her friends, was always deemed “Most Likely to Succeed” among the three due to her academic prowess. (p19) Leaving school with excellent grades, she joined a law degree at university and became member of various feminist groups.⁷¹ Sunita’s interest in such activism was strong but short lived as she fell prey to the charms of Akash mid-way through her course and failed her finals. Her

⁷¹ Writing about interest in political activism by British Asian youth in the late 1970s and early 80s, Avtar Brah asserts: These women’s groups addressed patriarchal issues simultaneously with those of class and racism, and in the process found themselves interrogating the gender politics of male-dominated youth movements and ‘Left groups’, as much as the ethnocentrism and ‘race’ politics of white feminist groups. (Brah, 1996: 44)

dream of a career as a barrister remained unfulfilled. When she met Akash at university he seemed to her to be the “best of East and West in one perfectly formed package and I knew how lucky I was to have found him”. (p89) Ten years hence, when we meet her in the novel, she is the stereotypical Indian wife married to Akash, mother of two young children Nikita and Sunil and occupies a comfortable job at the Citizen’s Advice Bureau. With passage of time and change in circumstances, she has unconsciously been transformed into a conventional middle-aged married Indian woman, her “delicate, doll-like features ...softened by the fleshy mantle ... worn like a uniform”. (p19) She startles herself when she discovers her body after a long absence in the changing-room of a shop, horrified to find that it had been “invaded and reclaimed by children, hair and cakes”. (p125) Engulfed in a pain and fear of “all that she could have been”, she is at a loss to find a starting point to put things right again. (p164)

In many British Asian texts, new generation Britons who have been educated in Britain and exposed to British culture are seen to question the ideas, values, and practices of first-generation migrants to the UK. From her childhood, Sunita was preached strong Indian values, principles loaded with patriarchal supremacy gaining precedence over the rights of a woman. It was inculcated in her that there was a hierarchy in the scheme of things and that women were always superseded by men. Syal is portraying a society stratified by gender, where women have less economic, political and social power than men. What the author is endeavouring in this novel is to satirise the dominant constructions of an ‘Asian’ identity, a British viewpoint on Asian culture, only to destabilise such constructions.

Within the milieu set by the author, the predicament of divorced women is nothing but ignominious and their stories remain unheard and suppressed. The novel thus raises serious questions about the dominant notions of women's position in the Asian community, modes of community-control and how second-generation women have to grapple with conflicting cultures. Agreeing with Ranasinha, I contend that in this novel Syal disrupts established notions "by dramatizing how constructs of generation, class, sexuality and gender, impinge on the contested issue of what it means to be of an Asian origin in Britain". (Ranasinha, 2007: 14)

Tania, Syal's third protagonist is depicted as the most feisty, candid and colourful character in the novel. Endowed with sharp, leonine features, her beauty was "her passport out of East London". (*Life*, p18) A comprehensive educated girl from a blue-collar Punjabi family, Tania was "force-fed her language and rituals as a matter of survival" against a seemingly hostile British culture from an early age. (p146) The sociologist Brah points out how having a 'cultural identity' was crucial to one's existence in sixties Britain and most Asian parents made a conscious effort to teach their children about their background and history in order to strengthen their roots. (Brah, 1996: 36) Tania's father, the authority figure in the family, strove hard to deny his humble origins and instil in the children the need to be good, "Only the best!" he recommended, in order to succeed. (*Life*, p144) Unlike the handful of South Asian migrants who were educated and came from middle class families, Tania's father was part of the first generation migrants to post-war Britain from poor and rural backgrounds of Punjab in India, and was therefore restricted to the life of an unskilled factory worker for years to

come. The only means of advancing in the social ladder available to him was by gaining economic and educational success. Her mother however, was more pragmatic, encouraging her daughter to make the most of her carefree existence. Despite the push and pull of commandments at home, Tania “broke loose from her traditional moorings and drifted into an uncharted ocean”. (p18)⁷² She is among the ‘new women’ described by Yasmin Hussain who move beyond their tradition to claim their individuality. (Hussain, 2005)

Among Syal’s three protagonists, Tania is the one most conscious of her ‘liminal’ location and complex existence. She knows that she is trapped “somewhere in the middle”, (*Life*, p149) and utterly derides prying questions from her community members: as to “who what why she was, to whom she belonged (father/husband/workplace), why her life wasn’t following the ordained patterns for a woman of her age, religion, height and income bracket”. Tania also detests their desire to “own her, claim her, preserve her”. (p15) Like the voice of the priest at Chila’s wedding, she recognizes from within herself that she does not ‘belong’. This question of ‘belonging’ is central to writing by many black and Asian women writers and as Weedon postulates, it is true “especially where community is not available as a positive resource and where positive role models are absent”. (Weedon, 2008)

Tania is also astutely aware that however modern and emancipated new generation Asian women are in terms of their appearance and career in

⁷² Tania’s character is highly reminiscent of the young Kuli in Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman* where she is keen to break loose from her traditional Indian moorings to experience the life beyond through her romantic liaison with her English boyfriend.

the public domain, such as women who sport mini-skirts and “run business empires, save lives on operating tables, mould and develop young minds ... kick ass across courtrooms and computer screens”, in the private sphere of their homes they are very different. (*Life*, p147) In fact through Tania, Syal provides a commentary on how Asian women undergo transformation and subjugation when it comes to the domestic environment:

They step over the threshold, the Armani suit shrinks and crumples away, the pencil skirt feels blowsy and tight, the head bows, the shoulders sag, within a minute they are basting and baking and burning fingers over a hot griddle, they are soothing children and saying sorry, bathing in-laws and burning with guilt, packing lunch-boxes and pouring oil over choppy waters, telling everyone who will listen they don't mind, wondering why they left their minds next to the muddy wellies and pile of junk mail in the front porch. (*Life*, p147)

Here Syal critiques the fact that in spite of women's presence in the public domain in contemporary Britain, expectations of their role in the private sphere remains unaltered in the eyes of the community. New generation women too find it hard to escape such fetters. It exposes a problem which is as much to do with the stereotypical perception of the role of women at home as the traditional mindset of these women who find it hard to disentangle themselves from such conventions.

Tying these women into domesticity is the ritual of marriage in Tania's mind. Like conventional Asian parents, her parents too had attempted to find suitable matches for her. But the response from prospective grooms and their families is consistent: “‘She is too modern’ ...; ‘She is too Western’...; ‘He needs someone who will fit in with his job’ ...; ‘He liked her but is looking for someone more like us’.” (p150) Through Tania, Syal attempts to destabilise the dominant constructions of an Asian identity. We also find Syal

voicing her concerns about the derogatory light in which new generation women continue to be viewed within their own community. The docile, submissive and compliant image of the Asian woman still dominates.

To extricate herself from the ambivalence of her existence, unlike her childhood friends Chila and Sunita, Tania undertakes a journey of life with a white British man and a glamorous job as a television journalist in Soho. According to Tania, her “culture is a movable feast”, something that can be picked up or discarded at one’s will.(p148) This metaphor of ‘culture’ being a ‘movable feast’ is quite evocative as it implies the dynamism of culture, challenging any fixed essentialising notion. Observing from the perspective of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall defines ‘culture’ as embodying:

both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence; *and* as the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and which they are embodied. (Hall, 1980)

In this sense, ‘culture’ is a historically specific process which encompasses the involvement of one’s lived experiences. It is not a static entity but a fluid, shifting signifier, finding expression in response to ‘the conditions of existence’. Syal’s perception of culture as ‘movable’ or variable and a ‘feast’ celebrating the lived traditions and practices seems in keeping with Hall’s theorisation.⁷³ Moreover, Tania also decides to make a choice about the kind of life she desires and is ready to accept the consequence if anything goes awry: “When things go belly up, Chila always blames karma, Sunita blames

⁷³ Both Hall and Syal’s views are supported by Brah’s theory of ‘culture’ which is conceptualised as “a process; a nexus of intersecting significations; a terrain on which social meanings are produced, appropriated, disrupted and contested”. According to Brah, cultural specificities retain their importance but “are construed as fluid modalities, as shifting boundaries that mediate structures and relations of power”. (Brah, 1994)

her failed university career, I blame no-one but myself'. (*Life*, p148) Through the construction of Tania, the novel thus makes an ideological claim about women's agency, which is then unravelled through the plot.

It is remarkable however that both journeys that Tania chooses to undertake are masked in irony. After loosening her traditional moorings, she crosses the threshold as it were, with her English boyfriend Martin. A struggling writer Martin perceives Tania to be an exotic beauty who has an alien streak in her. Growing up in the immigrant quarters of Slough, his mind was ingrained with traditional Indian beauties depicted in photographs or film posters displayed in Indian supermarkets, but Tania's uniqueness superseded them all –

It was her paradoxes that ensnared him: the tailored suit and the leonine mane of blue-black hair, the delicate hands banging savagely on the table, that perfect face spitting fishwife bile. (p107)

The absurdity of the paradoxical rendition of an Eastern beauty with a Western demeanour attracted him towards Tania; he had however identified that she was somewhat disconnected from her native culture, an oddity that he found hard to fathom. Tania did not fit neatly into Martin's stereotypical image of a woman with an oriental/Asian lineage:

she understood basic Punjabi but didn't speak it; Martin had been to India and she hadn't; it was Martin who brought home the latest fusion CDs and had to prise her away from Frank Sinatra to listen to them; it was him who brought home fireworks for Diwali or booked tickets for a Dussehra festival, and her who always refused to join in. (p109)

Despite Martin's fascination with the exotic Indian beauty, Tania seemed to demonstrate a clear rejection of her background. However, on one occasion she explains their differences to him:

I am the genuine article and therefore I don't have to try. I just have to be. You on the other hand, being middle-class, white and male, have to try any passing bandwagon, because what else have you got? (p109)

What we witness here is Syal toying with Martin's character in an effort to disrupt stereotypes. Also evident is Tania's endeavour to explore her Indian culture without any frills of artificiality encircling it. In the process she is also exposing the limitations of British culture that fails to sustain creative individuals like Mark. In Tania, we find features of a new generation Briton who is not merely challenging but destabilising dominant norms through her agency and demonstrates the capacity to shift effortlessly between different spaces to negotiate her 'difference'. Occupying alternative social positions, she is candid enough to admit that "he's different enough to free me from my past" although Martin would never understand that. (p153) Her difference from established notions of Indian femininity while filling her with anxiety is nevertheless exhilarating, providing her with freedom. It is thus simultaneously liberating and enabling for her, a fact that Martin finds hard to comprehend.

The other role that Tania adopts is that of a high profile documentary producer for a television company in Soho. Unlike her friends and so-called traditional Indian women who abandon careers in favour of an apparently 'settled' life of matrimony and motherhood, she engages in a journalistic career straight after university. Antagonising her family members by not being at home "feeding everyone, supporting everyone, smiling at everyone, keeping the family going, filling themother-shaped hole", she has instead chosen another life away from home. (p110-111) By using patronising vocabulary such as 'feeding', 'supporting', 'filling' and 'mother-shaped hole',

Syal is satirising the dominant notions of women within the Asian community through warm humour. The irony of it is brought to light as Tania is constantly reminded by various personalities about what is important and real; what it means to be “Asian and British, at least for the purposes of television”.(p63)

So far Tania has created documentaries related to social issues affecting the Asian community. However, on this occasion, Jonathan, Tania’s boss instructs her to explore the ‘human angle’ in her forthcoming documentary. In his opinion, “Relationships” are the “new religion of the millennium” and for that Tania needs to provide a “unique insight into ordinary people on an extraordinary journey”. (p65)⁷⁴ Struck by Chila’s innocence and amazed by her fantasies – “Holding on for her Prince Charming, finding her soul mate through an arranged marriage”, (p65) he recommends the portrayal of such relationships in Tania’s forthcoming documentary.

In her documentary, Tania chose to rely on Sunita and Chila’s relationships as the key contributions apart from including footages of few other couples that she had interviewed. However, in the making of the documentary, a lot of truths unfold that have been lying buried beneath the facade of happy marriages and friendships. The camera with its candid eye and Tania with the detachment of an interviewer/photographer are able to see more than the people themselves - a dramatic irony as it were. This is an interesting narrative ploy on Syal’s part as Tania replicates the role that the

⁷⁴ Focus on relationships is a key element in many new generation black and Asian writing and Tania’s boss Jonathon seems to be voicing the need for a similar focus in films, marking the corresponding shifts and developments taking place in literary and artistic practices.

author performs in the novel through fiction - making her characters/performers act out stereotypes/roles and thereby reveal the underlying tensions hidden from the naked eye. Syal's own experiences of dabbling in media, enables the successful execution of this ploy in her novel.

The climax of the novel is arrived at the screening of the documentary at the Buzz Bar. While the film provides Tania with an escape from her traditional moorings and unpleasant past, for the two other protagonists, it is a revelation of their ambiguities and complex existences. It is, as it were, a story within a story, providing multiple readings. Different members of the audience including the contributors have different expectations – a cocktail of excitement, fear and anticipation engulfing them. However what they see are strange reflections of themselves that seem alien and which they find hard to accept. The film tells a story, but not how they remember it, provoking self-introspection. The camera with its “ironic eye” and Syal through her fictional strategy has constructed and captured things that escape normal vision. Thus when Chila appears on the screen, she recognises her face but not the expression – something that “she didn’t recognize as part of herself”. (p176) While displaying her precious possessions in the house, Chila also naively admits on camera that these appliances are necessary for Deepak’s status as he has a good job in finance, but she is unaware of his ‘real’ profession: “No, I don’t know what he does exactly ... funny that”. (p176) What Chila ventriloquises is Syal’s satirisation of the conflicts within relationships in the Asian community. Chila’s simplicity and naivety reveal her lack of knowledge of the man that she has married and idolises. Through Chila, Syal comments that while on the one hand such ignorance can be seen as the result of an

arranged marriage where the couple are not well acquainted with each other, on the other hand it reveals a gap in their relationship, a gulf that should have been bridged in a marriage of love. Towards the end of the film when Chila is shown cheerfully exhibiting her cherished wedding photographs, Deepak is seen dismissing them with utter disgust: "God no! Not those bloody photos. Put them away". (p179) His contempt and disdain for the memories of their marriage is as much shocking for Chila as it is for the audience. Moreover, his scornful expression with a "cold snap in his eyes and baring of teeth" manage to make him appear frightening and ugly, a side that Chila was completely unaware of until this moment. (p179) Although ostensibly it reinforces the troubled relationship between the couple where channels of communication are broken, there is a clever intention behind such portrayal. Interestingly, Syal/Tania has deliberately constructed the episode to expose the 'hidden' or 'secret' issues within individuals and the community and the author's representation of the characters reveal the heterogeneity and complexity of immigrant lives.

Similar constructions of complexity in new generation Britons are visible in the depiction of the relationship between Sunita and her husband. The shot of Sunita's chaotic household is symbolic of her life that is in total disarray – a fact that has recently bothered her but eluded Akash completely. She also finds herself unrecognisable: "a sad-eyed, frumpy housewife ... sitting next to her husband, whose knees twitched throughout her chatter,...who prefaced every answer with a tremulous sigh". (p177) Her own admission about their relationship is also surprising: "I think we have a good life together ... it's what we expected". (p177) Speculation and not the

certainty is a signal of the problems brewing in their marital relationship. Ironically, the very next shot depicts Akash declaring that in his profession as a therapist, “you get to recognize the warning signs in a bad relationship very early on” and sermonises that “the main problem is communication. Men tend to ignore the problems and hope they will go away”. (p177) The talk is accompanied by images of Sunita staring into space, totally oblivious of surrounding activities. Such juxtapositioning of truth and philosophy is a testimony to Syal’s fictional art and functions to heighten the severity of the predicaments that both characters have chosen to ignore thus far. It also points to Akash’s complete lack of insight into his own drifting and troublesome marriage. The insularity of male perception is highlighted along with their emotional deficiency. The crisis is further intensified by Sunita’s admission that she wants to discuss the pain of aborting their first child but is unable to do so: “I want to talk about it, but he’s so busy and ...you know what it’s like –”. (p178) This replication of theory in practice is an observation by Syal on the new generation men who are ostensibly more modern, informed and liberal but fail to practise what they preach when it comes to their own homes. The voice of women still remains unheard and marginalised within their homes as well as in their community.

The aftermath of the documentary film is catastrophic for Chila. Not only does she discover an unknown facade of her husband but also witnesses Deepak and Tania kissing on the balcony of the bar. Realisation dawns on her that the unrecognisable feature she had spotted on her face on the screen was actually one of fear – fear of losing her loved ones, Deepak and Tania. After this episode, she is able to understand “what has always

haunted her, what propelled every smile, every altruistic gesture, every cheerful acquiescence, every I don't mind, jaan.... No-one must leave". (p183) Chila recognises that the shield of 'niceness' that she adorned to attract everyone towards her ultimately provided no guarantee against attack and loss. Here, Syal portrays traditional notions of femininity as ideologically disempowering and disabling as Chila is unable to protect herself against such a heavy blow.

The events following the screening of the documentary bring Tania's 'liminality' to the fore. Caught in-between her loyalties towards her friend and love for Deepak, Tania's existence is steeped in ambiguities and inconsistencies of meaning as theorised by Turner. She finds herself in a 'liminal' phase where relationships and boundaries are "temporarily undefined, beyond normative social structure". In Victor Turner's opinion, "this weakens them since they have no rights over others. This also liberates them from structural obligations." (Turner, 1982: 27) While agreeing with Turner, I would like to highlight my extension of the concept of 'liminality' to 'multi-liminality' by asserting that occupation of such a territory is not necessarily limited to a temporary period but can exist permanently. Tania's 'liminality' is not a transitory experience but a perpetual one, which only became heightened and conspicuous following the screening of the documentary.

In her professional life however, Tania had taken a giant leap. After the success of her documentary, she is welcomed in plush offices and "served designer infusions in hand-painted pottery". (*Life*, p249) By portraying the weaknesses and inconsistencies within the Asian community,

her documentary has fitted into the category reserved for the stereotypical immigrant film, and hence deemed a success. After the success of her first 'film', she is even assured of her own production company. Moreover, being an Asian woman with beauty, she is considered "marketable". Tania, however, is keen to contest such views: "I'm a director first, an Asian second, I care about my audience's IQ, not their race". (p250) She realises that she is now positioned at the top of a "shaky pedestal", a precarious location which is far removed from the stable ground that she is accustomed to; a ground where her friends and family reside. Through the characterisation of Tania, Syal is dramatising the loneliness of the gendered individual who is professionally successful and dares to challenge established notions of femininity.

In the novel, Syal makes a key observation about black and Asian artistic productions being marginalised in a dominant white society and the limitations imposed on such productions. The reluctance of black and Asian cultural productions to be subsumed within the 'mainstream' categories is also highlighted. Such observation is validated by Tania's assertion: "I don't want to do any more Asian stories. No more grubbing the ghetto, I'm mainstream now". (p258) She questions:

Why does everything I do have to come back to me? People like me? My family? My background? Our dirty linen? I'm an artist not a bloody social worker. Nobody asks Scorsese to only make Italian mob movies –. (p 259)

Through Tania, Syal raises provocative questions related to stereotyping of Asian artists and their cultural productions. She is voicing concern on behalf of the entire black and Asian artist fraternity who remain marginalised and are readily assumed to be only capable of producing art related to their

community. Incorporation of their work within mainstream productions is denied due to such dominant assumptions.

Not only does Syal raise the question of this black and Asian marginality in terms of cultural productions but also endeavours to provide an answer through Mark. He ventriloquises Syal's reasoning in response to Tania's question:

He chooses to do them because he knows he can do them better than anyone else. He started out telling his own stories and their successes gave him the power to choose. You can't see the join, Tania. You can't separate what you're good at from what you are. But you can use it to get you into a position of power and take it from there. First you've got to know your voice, and then you've got to like it. Get it? (p259)

Mark's explanation is a truth that Tania has tried to abscond from since her childhood – she has been trying to deny her background and who she is. Her identity has been an enigma for her, a stigma almost and thus she has always attempted to venture outside her community to assert her 'self'.

Writing about South Asian women's writing, Yasmin Hussain argues:

Within the diasporic literature they (women) go on to assert and explore their own identity ... The women's fate when they assert their identity leaves them outside the community to which they belong. Feelings of isolation, frustration and anger therefore pull them back. (Hussain, 2005: 69)

A similar feature can be observed in many British Asian women's writing and Syal's novels are a case in point. In *A&M* when Meena had ventured outside her community to explore an English life with Anita Rutter's 'Wenches Brigade', she was left feeling betrayed, angry and frustrated after some time which eventually propelled her back to her Indian community. A similar situation can be witnessed in *Life*, through the character of Tania – in the effort to assert her identity elsewhere, she has had to move away from her

Indian traditions, break ties with all members of her family and even put the close alliance with her childhood friends at stake.

Tania's encounter with Mark infuriates her but not as much as her betrayal by Deepak. While spending an amorous night with Deepak she learns that Chila is in labour. Chila's pregnancy had been hidden from her so far; Deepak had continued his affair with her despite his wife's pregnancy. His lack of sympathy and duplicity incenses Tania so much that she demands him to leave instantly. It is only at this point that she realises the consequences of her actions of rejecting her past and is left completely devastated and distraught. Like Randhawa's novel *AWOW, Life* too seems to be making a case for community – asserting the importance of roots over ambition and individuality.

Sunita is able to rise from the depths of despair by undertaking a journey in a new direction in an effort to rediscover her 'self' and forge new friendships. Visiting the benefit party organised by Beroze, literally and metaphorically singing to the tune of "I will survive", she is able to lift herself from the mental and physical dungeons in which she had imprisoned herself and rekindle her passions, "her backbone, her legs, her equals, her beloved blooming friend, the world beyond with its cruelty and the compassion it engendered in return". (*Life*, p227) In order to develop herself, she takes the decision to adopt a new image and a new career by undertaking a Legal Secretarial course at college. Sunita is also able to rejuvenate herself by striking a friendship and romantic liaison with a young Asian doctor Krishan. Though much younger to her in terms of age, she finds his views interesting: "He believes that not belonging anywhere is a good and creative place to be"

(p228); a view similar to Turner's ideology of a 'liminal' location which all three friends seem to occupy in the novel. This friendship is able to reinvigorate her, enabling her to live a second childhood and indulge in a youthful rebellion in which she had never enlisted. The disruption of normality is what injects life-blood in Sunita and she savours her uncertain location: "That was where I wanted to be, pregnant with possibilities, swelled with hope. With nothing defined, nothing overstated, nothing decided, I felt safe, blameless, innocent". (p247) Based on Sunita's perception, I would like to suggest that the novel privileges the occupation of a 'multi-liminal' location by new generation Britons. We find here an assertion of a 'liminal' positioning where anxiety is balanced by exhilaration, weakening is accompanied by liberation, disabling and enabling an individual at the same time and marked by renewal and regeneration.

After Deepak's betrayal, Tania is thrust back to her roots, her family and friends. She ventures the streets of her childhood home in search of "somewhere she could call home". (*Life*, p273) After months of lack of contact, her brother informs her about her father's illness, followed by her regular visits to the hospital to care for him. However, what she really hankers for at this point is her friendship with Chila and Sunita. In her childhood, life was uncomplicated with "only having to choose between two worlds, home and everywhere else. And in between was the long walk home, and the three of us, rebuilding the crossing on each journey". (p319) In her journeys away with an English boyfriend and her career, she had missed her "fellow travellers" with whom she had built the bridge and "walked it together". (p319) What we witness at the end of the novel is their unique

reunion. When they finally meet, she finds that her friends don't fit her recalled images:

I had been looking for two girls, one dark and dumpy, hovering hesitantly in her space, never quite owning it, waiting for permission to proceed, and the other taller, long hair in need of a good brush, a plump, sturdy arm around her companion, ready for fight or flight. (p321)

What she finds instead are a "confident, curvy woman with her gleaming bob and her soft-smiling, lotus-open friend, standing proudly, glowing with pleasure as she rearranged the blankets around her new son". (p321) While she had moved away from them, they have undergone immense transformation. Despite all the changes and shifting of spaces, however, she is able to realise that some things remain unchanged: "it is possible to love without expecting anything back". (p329)

Chila appears a totally altered character at the end. Her naive dependency on her friends has given way to a confident and independent person who is ready to confront the world alone. After the screening of the film, Chila had felt "powerless", exposed and vulnerable, betrayed by all – by herself, Deepak and her friend Tania. Since the birth of her child however, she is a different person. On one occasion her mother had mentioned that "at home we say, when a woman gives birth, she has one foot in death. It is a dangerous time. But when she has given birth, she gives birth to two new people, the baby and herself". (p295) Motherhood has imparted a new direction to Chila, irrespective of the truth behind the maxim. Viewing with the lens of 'liminality', giving birth is also a symbolic journey that enables an individual to undergo transformation and liberates them from normative moorings. At this point the 'liminal' subject is located between fixed points of

classification, in an ambiguous situation, structurally invisible in terms of societal classification systems. 'Liminality' is the condition of being midpoint between a status sequence, contends Turner. (Turner, 1983: 113) Consequently, their sense of identity becomes altered and they are no longer bound by the fixity that had prevented them from shifting positions. Enjoying the freedom to move between different locations, gliding back and forth along the 'liminal spectrum', such personae are able to view things with detachment and disassociation, enabling them to comprehend themselves with a critical and enlightened perspective. Thus, when quizzing Tania about her relationship with Deepak, Chila is able to realise: "I don't think I ever loved him ... it was the idea of him. I ... wanted to do what was right ... and good". (*Life*, p325) Having read romantic novels from childhood, she had conjured images of a fantastical fairy-tale marriage to a perfect husband with whom she would spend her life 'happily ever after'. It was only now that she is able to recognise that 'real' life is far from it. Giving birth to a child, engenders "a profound sense of completion" in Chila, and utterly transforms the once "catalogue-cutting dumbo and mistress of *faux pas*", into a meaningful being. (p292)

A 'liminal' positioning can be empowering, facilitating agency and resistance to dominant conventions and limitations imposed by social, economic and political factors, aspects that elide 'hybridity'. Thus we witness Chila's uncharacteristic and unfamiliar outburst to Sunita:

Don't tell me what I am feeling. Don't pretend what's happened is part of some big plan to make me into a superwoman or crap like that. You've got choices. I only had one and he's shat on me. And our baby. (p296)

Chila is fully cognisant of the reality of the situation and feels empowered to move positions to reorganise her disordered life.

Inhabiting a 'liminal' location, which "liberates them (individuals) from structural obligations", Chila is able to form alternative social arrangements for herself and her child. She is keen to fulfil her desires and make sense of the incongruities in her life. She has found it strange from childhood that despite being Indian, she has never visited India. Moreover, she has abided by Indian customs and traditions without actually knowing what they meant, basing only on second-hand knowledge. She has grown up listening to music by Lata Mangeshkar and watching Hindi movies with the mighty Himalayas as the backdrop, portraying an exotic image of India. Now, she aspires to take her son to India, interrogating for herself and for him, what 'India' really is. While Chila's wish reflects the classical ending to an immigrant tale where immigrants are restored to their roots, Weedon notes that:

For the second generation, faced by racialized boundaries that exclude them from Englishness, Scottishness, and Welshness, imagined places of origin play a role not only in negotiating white racism, but also in a wider search for identity and belonging which may become a quest involving a journey back to the parental country of origin. (Weedon, 2008: 30)

Visiting India will provide Chila with a connection with her origin and ancestry and enable her to experience her culture at first hand.⁷⁵ Syal's ideology, as evidenced through Chila, is in support of Hall who theorises that 'cultural identity' "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past". (Hall, 1996) In order to understand 'what we

⁷⁵ Interestingly, Syal herself has recently visited India in search of her roots. Her visit was filmed as part of BBC's documentary series 'Who Do You Think You Are?' where celebrities visit their native country in an attempt to trace their ancestry. The programme was telecast on 7th December 2004 on BBC.

really are' and 'what we have become' through historical interventions, it is necessary to delve into the past. Without such understanding, Chila will find it difficult to look forward to the future with her son. She also wishes to expose him to diverse influences by playing "him all kinds of music to sweeten his soul" including the Seventies soul music "I will survive". She believes that "he ought to understand there were many different songs and ways of singing them". (*Life*, p304) Being a 'liminal' Briton, belonging to an undefined space in-between being British and Indian, she wants her son to learn about the multiple ways of articulating one's existence and identity.

Though the novel ends on a note of sadness with Tania's father being cremated, there is a sense of overwhelming liberation in the three protagonists. Tracing a journey that had started with the wedding of Chila and Deepak and ending in a scene of death, Syal has intended to demonstrate how new generation women negotiate their complex existence through different phases of their lives. There is an optimism at the end that despite their problematic predicaments, the protagonists have managed to 'survive' and display dogged strength that has enabled them to shift between different positions in their struggle to find their identity and a place where they 'belong'.

Conclusion

From this chapter we gain an understanding of the way in which the 'liminal' spaces of the collectives functioned in galvanising artistic expressions of the formerly 'black' and then the splintered 'black British' and 'British Asian' women writers amidst brewing frustration and dissatisfaction in

1980s Britain. Collectives such as the Asian Women Writers' Collective provided a sanctuary to emerging ethnic women writers, enabled them to give voice to their articulations of 'Britishness' and manifest resistance against hegemonic domination.

Certain common trends are identifiable in the work of new generation British Asian writers. In their 'politically engaged' fiction, diasporic communities become focus of attention for the exploration of complexities resulting from life in contemporary Britain. It is the 'lived' experiences in England that take precedence over nostalgia for a 'home' left behind, although that 'home' is never quite eliminated. In quest for a sense of belonging, the characters are seen to adopt multiple selves and glide along a 'liminal' spectrum, fluidity rather than fixity being their defining feature. It has been my argument throughout this chapter that the heterogeneity of the new generation Britons is better captured through the paradigm of 'liminality' than Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity' that has dominated discourses on black British literary production. It is also evident from the characterisation of the women protagonists in the novels that they come to a negotiated understanding of the self that is as much an invention as something that is shaped by prevailing stereotypes and ideologies. The stereotypical image of the meek and submissive Asian woman is supplanted by powerful and courageous women who are ready to challenge oppression from a patriarchal white and Asian society. To them action from 'within' the community is important in tackling the challenges 'outside'. The community too plays a crucial role in the novels – while on the one hand we see the gendered modes of control imposed by the community causing irreconcilable problems for the 'liminal'

Britons, it also finds positive representation as source of support. In her novel, Randhawa even endorses the power of the community to transform the present and provide possibility for growth.

New generation British Asian writers can be seen to be formally inventive, using different fictional strategies to carve out new discursive spaces for the representation of the multiplicity of British Asian existence.

Writing about contemporary British Asian fiction, Chris Weedon explains:

Widespread use of first-person narrative enables texts to articulate the affective and emotional dimensions of oppression and the processes of resistance and solidarity that produce new forms of subjectivity and identity. (Weedon, 2008)

Such narrative strategy aids the exploration of the heterogeneity of characters in their process of forming new subjectivity and identity in Britain. Previously static binaries of 'home' and 'abroad', 'immigrant' and 'native' are translated into differently conceived possibilities within the contested space of what it is to be British.

What is also evidenced in this chapter is an interesting perspective of British-Asian life in the East End of London, located in the suburbs beyond the 'centre' of London. We find a construction of the British Asian subject from an alternative perspective which provides a contrast to the narrative fictionalised in suburban Midlands. Articulations of 'Britishness' from the migrant ghettos of the East End, reveals how Syal's Midlands upbringing inflects her representation of suburban London and reflects how multiculturalism manifests itself in different locations of contemporary Britain.

Chapter II – Anthologising the Midlands

Expressions of multiculturalism by black and Asian women writers have been widely anthologised in the Midlands. This chapter will commence by looking at the form of the anthology as a literary genre, comprising a discussion on the 'anthology' as a form in which blacks and Asians have created an artistic space for themselves. The chapter will then explore the inception of 'black'⁷⁶ writing in the post-world war era in the UK. The final section of the chapter will examine the specific categorisation of black British writing, black and Asian women's writing in particular, in the provincial geographies of devolved black Britain, especially the Midlands, through a discussion of selected short stories from two chosen anthologies. Within that section, the crucial role played by regional presses in disseminating such literature will also be examined. The concept of 'Liminality' will be used to inflect the reading of the chosen texts as I argue that the heterogeneity of new generation blacks and Asians in Britain can be best comprehended by using this anthropological paradigm. I also contend that literary articulations from the 'liminal' space of the Midlands reflect the 'liminal' existence of these women writers and propose a move beyond 'hybridity' that has dominated contemporary multicultural discourse in Britain.

⁷⁶ The term 'black' in the British context is a complex category and has undergone immense transformation through the last few decades as has been pointed out in the Introduction. 'Black' has been used in this chapter differently to denote different moments in history. While in the initial stages of the chapter I refer to 'black' as a racial marker, when all 'coloured' people were categorised under the umbrella term of 'black', as the chapter progresses, I have used the term to refer to the African – Caribbean population as it was understood following the disaggregation of the term in the 1980s. As a result of interventions by major cultural theorists and developments in Cultural Studies, separate categories of 'black British' and 'British Asian' had been created to articulate their differential experiences of Britishness and find exemplification in their literary productions.

Using the metaphor of flower-arranging to describe the 'anthology', Kaminsky eloquently postulates, "flower arranging is a domestic art; and like any women's art, it lacks prestige. Yet flower arranging is subtle and complex". (Kaminsky 1996) The arrangement of writings in an anthology is an equally subtle and complex art. It is this intricate art created by women that has been largely neglected, and needs exploration by literary scholars and critics. In this chapter I will examine two anthologies *Whispers in the Walls* (2001) and *Her Majesty* (2002) comprising writing by black and Asian women writers. It is on the basis of this analysis that I wish to make the claim that by using the form of the anthology, black and Asian women have created an artistic space for themselves and attempted to express their 'Britishness' from the Midlands region of devolved Britain.

The anthology as a literary form

The 'anthology' represents a collection of poems, stories, songs, articles, or other literary texts by the same or different authors chosen by a compiler. They are characterised as volumes containing material which have been selected specifically for consistency and quality, usually long after the pieces have been first published and are designed to serve posterity. Etymologically, the word anthology is derived from the Greek word '*anthos*' meaning flowers and '*logia*' meaning collection. It refers to a 'bunch of flowers' rather than a 'clump of grass' or simply a 'bundle of twigs' and the flower is used as a metaphor to symbolise a literary text. The term denotes 'a bouquet of flowers' for the specific reason that an anthology should ideally refer to an arrangement of the best examples of a certain kind of literary

genre or category. The ideology behind any arrangement, whether floral or textual, is to establish an order of relations between the objects of arrangement and therefore, both the final product and the process are equally important. Kaminsky notes, "Like any bouquet, the final product depends on the skill of the maker in choosing, cutting and arranging the flowers, and of deciding what a flower is in the first place". (Kaminsky, 1996) Similar principles are used to arrange the literary texts in an anthology. The purpose served by such a compilation is to present the choicest selection of pieces by certain authors as well as to popularize a certain genre of work.

By using the form of the anthology, many writers create an artistic space for themselves in which they give expression to their literary art. Each piece in an anthology is a distinct work of art which can be read and appreciated independently, yet needs to be read and understood as part of the collection as a whole. It is, as it were, the anthology's ambition to represent the whole through its parts. Different motivations exist behind the choice of the contents in an anthology – some editors collect works that have been previously published, others may be a collection of contemporary work as this chapter will go on to illustrate; it could be a compilation of works from a variety of genres or even those written hundreds of years apart. While some may comprise a slender volume of poetry, there may be others which constitute a combination of poetry, history and fiction. But despite such variations, they all conform to one basic model described by Barbara Benedict as: "a multifarious collection of literary works designed for "dip, sip, and skip" reading". (Benedict, 2003)

Benedict also points out that anthologies are “more than one work, at the same time as they also are one work.” (Benedict, 2003) In her opinion, they uphold ‘variety and plenitude’ within one volume. However, compiling and editing such a volume is not a simple endeavour. Continuing with the metaphor of flowers, Kaminsky explains that there are intricacies and multiple-dimensions involved in the organisation of an anthology. “The well-made bouquet” she claims

is an artifice that provides a multiple view of the flowers that form it. It invites the contemplation and comprehension of each of its flowers individually, calling to mind the existence of the others of its species, enjoyed at other moments. It also invokes the landscape from which the flowers were gathered. Finally, it offers a juxtaposition in which all the flowers gathered together compose a new whole, in which each individual bloom might be seen afresh. (Kaminsky, 1996)

Creating an anthology therefore is an immensely complex and subtle process. It is not just the end product that is of essence but the means to the end, the process of preparing a volume, is equally crucial.

The grouping of texts in an anthology, the flowers that have been picked, arranged and sometimes cut, reflect the thematic or chronological organisation of the collection and demonstrate journeys undertaken by the authors and narrate the stories of people referred to in the selected pieces. While some anthologies are arranged in specific historical periods, there are others which have writing organised in terms of specific themes or genres, as for example, the expression of ‘Britishness’ in case of women writers of the Midlands. While certain anthologies have separate sections on prose, poetry, drama, letters, pamphlets and music, there are others which have thematic,

linguistic or cultural categorisations such as Settlers, Explorers and Crusaders, as exemplified in a recent anthology of Black British writing.⁷⁷

The anthology traces its ambiguity back to the late eighteenth century, when, as Price puts it, an “organicist theory of the text and a proprietary understanding of authorship gathered force at the same moment as legal and educational changes lent compilers new power”. (Price, 2003) The genre gained prominence in Restoration England as there were readers of all classes and gender who had the leisure and eagerness to read.⁷⁸

Although making the anthology a vehicle for literary history is the express intention of many compilers, few have succeeded in their mission. Instead, it is commonplace for anthologies to be reduced to their evaluative functions. While the canon wars of the 1980s drew attention to the role of anthologies in shaping national identities, Price contends that there are very few which have been able to rise merely beyond cataloguing the binary oppositions: “including or excluding particular texts, over-or under-representing a given category of authors, acknowledging or ignoring new writing.” (Price, 2003) However, exceptions prove the rule. The positive outcome arising out of the canon wars of the 1980s in accommodating works by women authors, writers of mixed heritage such as African American, Afro-Caribbean, Anglo-Indian and other marginalised groups as well as gay and lesbian writers, which broke open the old canon of English Literature, were

⁷⁷ Courttia Newland and Kadija Sesay (ed). *IC3 The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* London: Hamish Hamilton (2000)

⁷⁸ The form of the anthology mainly gained popularity through its collections of poetry. Although prose genres were also included in anthologies, the compactness of poetry, with its brevity, was particularly suited to this form as it could include a number of poems and literally offer more to the readers without each losing its significance.

illustrated in certain anthologies published in the last two decades of the twentieth century. These anthologies were able to rise beyond their function of literary appraisal and served as an unarticulated protest against the stigmatisation of certain work that had started to be published in an attempt to create a more inclusive and democratic literary arena and redefine the canonical English literary tradition.

In essence, it can be said that the anthology serves the purpose of providing “a testimony of its age, a monument among other things to the taste of the era in which it was compiled”. (Lacey, 2000) In case of the anthologies discussed in this chapter, the principal intention is to celebrate the emergence of a new canon of English literature and provide a platform for the formerly marginalised ‘black’ writers to showcase their literary achievements. The ‘anthology’ gives them a space to communicate their experiences of living in a white dominated society, thereby ‘uncovering’ the tradition and establishing a redefined canon of English literature by ‘black’ authors in the United Kingdom. The focus is also on the writing by women writers from multi-ethnic backgrounds, exemplifying a ‘literature of their own’, who have not always been considered worthy of being part of the ‘important’ or mainstream literary works and therefore not deserving of canonical status.

Emergence of Black Writing in Britain

The American literary scene was a precursor to the identity movements taking place in Britain and enabled black and Asian writers and artists to draw strength and inspiration from the political, literary and artistic

movements taking place in the United States in the mid – twentieth century.⁷⁹

However, it is extremely challenging to fit Black British Literature into a neat compartment as it does not exclusively relate to one geographical region or its own nation space. Mark Stein contends that such literature ‘does have its own space’ albeit imaginary. He justifies his claim by mentioning:

it is only through imagination that the multilayered connections to numerous traditions of writing, to numerous cultures, to numerous histories, to numerous nation-states across the continents can be conceived and abstracted. Black British literature derives from its own space, yet this space is not homogenous in terms of time and culture or location, it is an imagined experiential field of overlapping territories. (Stein, 2004: 10)

Echoing Derek Walcott’s protagonist Shabine, having no nation but an “imagi-nation”, Stein suggests that the ‘space’ occupied by black British literature is an imaginary space where numerous cultural and literary traditions collide, drawing together connections between a number of histories from a range of nation-states across the world. In this sense, black British literature is at once unique and complex. While it has an overlap with British Literature, it cannot simply be compared to post-colonial literature or any individual nation-state. Multicultural Britain is made up of a fusion of widely distinct groups hailing from different corners of the world and bringing with them specific histories which find expression in their work. These multilayered connections within black British literature can therefore only be conceived through imagination of the ‘space’ that it occupies. This ‘space’ in

⁷⁹ An interesting departure from the trend of anthologies of African-American writing was the publication of Herbert Hill’s anthology *Soon, One Morning* (first published in New York by Alfred Knopf Inc, in 1963) as *Black Voices: New Writing by American Negroes* (1964) in Britain. This was a significant move because it was probably for the first time that an anthology of African-American Literature was published in the UK and London by Elek Books of All Saints Street under its new name. This enhanced London’s status as the publishing capital of the world and established it as a site for the publication of Black British literature.

Stein's view is not homogeneous, but one that spans across an imagined field of overlapping territories, its heterogeneity being one of its defining features. (Stein, 2004)

This imaginary space may also be referred to as a 'space for revaluation'⁸⁰ which exists beyond political, social and cultural binaries, revising and hybridising the settled discursive hierarchies, according to Bromley. (Bromley, 2000) This perspective is equally important because major writings classified as 'black' British literature are, as Bromley suggests, expressions of the "affective experience of social marginality, from a disjunctive, fragmented, displaced agency, and from the perspective of the edge". (Bromley, 2000) This kind of literature emerges from a society surviving not in the centre but in the margins, and from identities that are displaced and fragmented in several cases. This new perspective from the 'edge' is therefore an alternative standpoint, a third space for reflection and revaluation, existing beyond the settled social, cultural and political binaries.⁸¹ As a consequence of this, in the words of Stuart Hall, "diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, 1993) thereby providing the new generation of black British writers with the opportunity to participate in the remaking of Britain.

The inception of black British literature can be dated back to 1750 which correlates with the expansion of the British Empire. The narratives of

⁸⁰ It is a term used by Roger Bromley in his chapter 'The Third Scenario' to refer to the writing of new cultural fictions from the perspective of the edge, margins.

⁸¹ Bromley's ideology of this alternative space is very similar to Turner's concept of the 'liminal' space which exists beyond normative societal and cultural constraints.

Ignatius Sancho date back to 1766.⁸² Writings by black authors such as John Marrant, Ottobah Cugoana and Olaudah Equiano subsequently followed but were not anthologized widely in America or Britain. The early anthologies of black writing published in America totally excluded these writers with the exception of Equiano and the poet Phillis Wheatley and even in the latest *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2000), there is a very brief reference to them in the paltry two-page entry on Black British Literature.

In the post-Windrush wave, a number of Caribbean's arrived in England to foster their literary careers. Some of the renowned writers among them were George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, CLR James, James Padmore and so on. A fellow-migrant was Una Marson, an active member of the 'League of Coloured Peoples' in England and editor of the magazine *Keys*.⁸³ She has been acclaimed by Rhonda Cobham as the 'foremother' of black British women writers since her experience in England gave her a "new awareness of herself as a black woman". In Cobham's opinion, this empathy grew out of "both a defensive reaction to British racial stereotyping and prejudice, but also her affirmation of racial and cultural solidarity with other Caribbean and African peoples among whom she worked in England." (Cobham & Collins, 1987: 4)

⁸² The Letters of Ignatius Sancho, was a series of letters that were written between 1766 – 1780 to friends, family, writers and newspapers. It is interesting to note that the correspondence was preceded by a note from the editor Miss Crewe, that the purpose of collecting and publishing the letters was to 'show that an untutored African may possess abilities equal to an European, and the still superior motive, of wishing to serve his family'. (C.L. Innes, 2002)

⁸³ As a spokesperson for the League, she took part in debates about the contemporary situation of people of African descent and encountered students and activists from different countries, including those involved in the Indian Nationalist Movement.

London was the epicentre of the English literary scene and the migrant writers felt that they were arriving back to their 'Mother Country', whose culture and manners had dominated their imagination since childhood. The BBC's *Calling the West Indies* radio programme originally designed as a means of communication between England-based West Indian servicemen and their families, was given a new direction by Marson enabling West Indian writers and artists to showcase their cultural productions. The programme soon transformed itself into a primarily literary one, broadcasting poetry and fiction by diasporic writers of Caribbean origin.⁸⁴ Renamed as *Caribbean Voices*, it was instrumental in launching the literary careers of authors of Caribbean origin. The programme also enabled publishers to be acquainted with evolving talent and open doors of opportunity to a number of writers.⁸⁵

The Caribbean Arts Movement played a major role in the development of black British literature.⁸⁶ The movement had as its focus, consolidation of "a broad alliance between all 'Third World' peoples whether they were in the 'metropolitan centres' or back in the 'peripheral' countries of origin". (Wambu, 1998) In many cases, it was the peripheral margins which were the moving force of any revolution as were the black 'ghettos' in metropolitan areas.

⁸⁴ Marson also altered the name to *Caribbean Voices*, deriving its name from a BBC feature by George Orwell called *Voices*. Like Orwell, Marson's intention too was to 'expose younger poets' "handicapped by the paper shortage and whose work isn't as well known as it ought to be". (Jarrett-Macauley, 1998: 157)

⁸⁵ Edward Kamau Brathwaite acknowledged the crucial role played by the programme by claiming that it 'was the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative writing in English' although it was doubtful as to "whether it made any significant impact on promoting Caribbean writing among a British readership". In Dabydeen's opinion, it was "the British newspaper and magazine which brought West Indian literature to the attention of the British". (Dabydeen, 2000)

⁸⁶ The Caribbean Arts Movement was set up by Brathwaite, the poet and novelist Andrew Salkey and the poet and publisher John La Rose in 1966.

Therefore, an alliance between the two instruments of revolution was essential and had a significant impact on writing in Britain. Moreover, as Innes argues, both in Britain and in the Caribbean, the Arts Movement had the “consequence of questioning the centrality of the English canon, and of creating alternative foci and lines of communication and response”. (Innes, 2002: 235) The outcome of such questioning was some decisive steps undertaken to ensure the publication of literature by black British and Caribbean writers.⁸⁷

The first wave of post-Windrush writers has been extensively discussed in academic circles and mainstream media through the years.⁸⁸ From this it appears that the ‘anthology’ as a literary form was popular but not as widespread as others. The initial anthologies concentrated on poetry and demonstrated a change in perspective from being temporarily concentrated on England to having a more permanent view point, thereby making a significant shift towards becoming black British. Among the better known anthologies in the initial years was the poet Andrew Salkey’s *Breaklight: An Anthology of Caribbean Poetry* (1971) published by Hamish Hamilton Limited, specialists in fiction. However, the ‘anthology’ as a literary form had taken a backseat in the initial years. The fact that the anthologising

⁸⁷ Some publishing houses came into existence with the sole purpose of promoting important and new work by such writers. John LaRose’s New Beacon Press, Eric and Jessica Huntley’s Bogle L’Ouverture Press and Margaret Busby’s Allison and Busby were some of the key players in publishing and promoting new black writing and have continued their tradition until the present day.

⁸⁸ These commemorative acts took place in the form of certain events such as, literary walks around ‘black London’, an ‘Economic Development Conference’ reviewing Afro-Caribbean participation in industry and commerce in Greenwich; ‘Arrival/Settlement’ a series of film presentations of local archives from the 1940s and 1950s in Hackney; a ‘Black Christian Conference’ in Liverpool; Exodus, an outdoor play based on the Windrush generation in Cardiff; a visual and oral exhibition in Hulme, Manchester etc. (James Procter, *Writing black Britain 1948-1998*: 2000)

of black literature was significantly less than the US is confirmed by Hanif Kureishi's assertion that despite having "sizeable audience" and a "whole range of stories" to be told, a "similar breakthrough in black writing as there had been in the States ... doesn't seemed to have happened" in Britain. (Kureishi, 1987:42)

The popularity of the form of the 'anthology' grew radically in the years to follow. The first official anthology which claimed to be by British West Indians was James Berry's *Bluefoot Traveller - Poetry* (1976).⁸⁹ This was the first instance when the term 'Westindians' was used. In the preface, Geoffrey Adkins claims: "Westindians represent a permanent and talented part of the community here; yet Britain has recognized this so far only in the most grudging way". (King, 2004) Berry's later collection, *News for Babylon: The Chatto Book of Westindian-British Poetry* (1984) published by Chatto and Windus, helped establish a substantial and growing collection of poetic expression by 'black' writers that had thus far been marginalised by the English literary canon. Reinforcing his poetic and editorial intention, Berry announced at an interview in 1984 that the 'black' writers "are bringing to an entrenched literary culture a new vitality, a strangeness, a difference, and it is infectious". (Berry, 1984)

The civil insurgences of 1981 incited violent outrage against the government's legislations related to racism and culminated in an explosive response from all sections of the black British artistic producers such as

⁸⁹ In his Introduction, Berry states that the aim of the collection is to: illustrate the combined influences of an African, Westindian and British background: and more particularly they present something of the Westindian's response to life in the British society. They show their incorporation into the society and their isolation within it. (Berry, 1976)

writers, artists, dramatists and filmmakers. The reality of 'black' presence in Britain was insisted through creative production resulting in a complete restructuring of British culture. It is not the non-existence of black literary production that is apparent in the middle of the 20th century but the invisibility of black writers as 'British'. The role of black publishing houses "in combating the official neglect and in setting new agendas at a time of great vulnerability for black British writing" cannot be underestimated notes Brennan. (Brennan, 1990: 8) It was due to the endeavour of these publishers, that a proliferation of black literary production came to be widely anthologised and published. Black and Asian writers were finally granted an acceptance into the white dominated English literary canon after years of being quarantined under the image of people from an 'alien culture'.

Women's role in black British literature

The positioning of black⁹⁰ British women's literature is essentially problematic not because of the volume or the quality of the work but because of the question of their visibility; whether their voices can be heard, listened to and echoed back into peoples' consciousness. The root of this problem can be explained in Sigrid Weigel's terms as the existence of "an elemental contradiction between women's importance in producing and reproducing material and social life on one hand, and women's marginal cultural production on the other". (Weigel, 1985)

⁹⁰ The use of the term 'black' as an encompassing political term arose in 1960s, embracing African, Caribbean and South Asian peoples in post colonial Britain. Although divisions by language, religion, nationality, and culture still persisted, it was possible to have a new politics of solidarity under these new relations of equivalence. The common political aim of resistance against the hegemonic British racism worked as a uniting force behind the consideration of people from Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin under the umbrella term of 'black'. But whether such women who were classified as 'black' could also be accorded the status of a 'black artist', remained questionable at the beginning.

Writings by black and Asian women in Britain have traditionally been ghettoized into small pockets of large multi-cultural cities. Hussein writes that such women were

placed in a safe asylum, where we could scream the screams of dumb bright birds just as long as we didn't make a noise in the neighbourhood, disturb the local residents by shattering the glass walls of our aviary. (Hussein, 1996)

The complexity of the problem encountered by these women writers in the 1960s and 70s is succinctly captured by Hussein's quote. The use of the metaphor of 'dumb bright birds' aptly sums up the plight of the 'black' women who were confined in enclosed spaces where they were only permitted to express themselves as long as they did not disturb any existing equilibrium. The marginalisation faced by these women in their own homes, community and the society at large is highlighted, making their existence, visibility and prominence incredibly problematic.

The decades of silence from the women writers can be ascribed to a whole host of cultural practices working against them - racial discrimination in a hegemonic white society, generic gender discrimination, problems associated with settling into a new country as well as finding suitable writing and publishing outlets willing to accommodate women. In addition to this, there was also a serious absence of critical work on the eminent 'black' writers. The only exception was Nasta's anthology *Motherlands* (1986), which aimed to critically appraise the works of certain established writers who happened to be essentially African American.⁹¹

⁹¹ *Motherlands* was a significant departure from tradition because it was an edited collection of critical essays on women's writings from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia rather than the literary productions themselves. Although numerous anthologies of short stories and collections of poems had been published by then, women's writing was largely excluded, especially that by women born outside the UK.

The 'paucity and marginality' of black women's writing in Britain was prevalent till the 1980s after which their work began being published. Becoming increasingly visible in British societies and expressing resistance against dominant racism, women began writing about their experiences and thereby establishing a new identity of their own.

In their move from invisibility to visibility, a number of anthologies featuring some women's writing appeared in Britain in the 1980s. The 'anthology' provided these marginalised women writers with a platform which enabled them to escape from and resist against oppression from all quarters and convey their experiences through a literary form. Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins's *Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by black Women* (1987), Kwesi Owusu edited *Storms of the Heart* (1988), Shabnam Grewal *et al* edited *Charting the Journey: Writings by black and third world women* (1988) and *Right of Way* (1989) among others used the 'anthology' to express their multiple and diverse voices, something that the other literary forms did not permit. The anthology *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (1985) by Bryan, Scafe and Dadzie attempted to communicate the experiences of black women and succeeded in capturing the mood of the time.⁹²

The collection, *Black Women Talk Poetry* (1987) comprising poetry by twenty black women was published by the collective Black Womantalk, the

⁹² The collection reflects the emerging black feminist consciousness, making it a landmark document emerging after a decade of black women's activism and organisation asserting the need for "presenting a collective analysis rather than merely revealing the sacrificed underbelly of black womanhood". (Mama, 1984)

first black women's press in England.⁹³ The collective was formed in 1983 to promote the work of black women through the establishment of small presses. In 1991, they also edited another anthology of prose and poetry entitled *Don't Ask Me Why*. Both these anthologies played a significant role in that they presented for the first time work produced by black British women writers and not just by black women immigrants.

A press devoted to the work by black women arose from the Sheba Collective in 1984 called the Sheba Feminist Press. The anthology *Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets* was advertised as the first collection of poetry by British-based black women. Such collections were inspired by movements' resisting oppression by the dominant white patriarchy as evidenced in the Grunwick dispute and similar demonstrations by OWAAD.⁹⁴ Sheba Feminist Press was also the publisher of a number of other literary volumes and was complemented by the Urban Fox Press founded by Maud Sulter in 1989. All these collectives demonstrate the movement of black British literature from an individual to one imbued with a communal consciousness and a heterogeneity that was not present in the former years. It is unfortunate however, that a number of these writers were

⁹³ Similar to the collectives mentioned in the previous chapter, these collectives too functioned as 'liminal' spaces, providing opportunities and platform to emerging black women writers and shielding their rising voices from state censorship.

⁹⁴ The OWAAD (Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent) acted as a catalyst in the rise in women's literary production in Britain and enabled them to "shatter the glass walls of (the) aviary". Founded in 1978, the organisation aimed to link the struggles of women in Africa and Asia with those living in diaspora, particularly Britain and had a profound impact on black British women's politics. Despite small beginnings with fifteen members, the organisation was soon able to mobilise significant number of black and Asian women from different parts of the country. Though short-lived, the organisation left an enduring impression on black women who went on to form black women's groups in their respective communities which promoted self-awareness and solidarity of black and Asian women against the hegemonic British racism and oppression.

only published as part of a movement and disappeared from the literary scene in the forthcoming years.

Thus by the middle of the 1980s a coterie of publishing houses had been established to promote this new wave of writers and poets such as Akira, Karia, Dangaroo, and Karnak House. Certain radical feminist publishing houses, such as the Women's Press, Sheba and Virago also promoted new black talent. A crucial publishing concern that has made a significant difference to the promotion of black British literature is the Peepal Tree Press. An independent publisher based in Yorkshire beyond the multicultural hub of London and established in 1985, Peepal Tree specialises in publishing new and performance based writers of black and Asian descent.⁹⁵ In their own words, their focus is on the 'Caribbean nation' although their concerns lie with "Black British and South Asian writing, the latter particularly with a diasporic and/or UK setting". (Peepal Tree)

The 1990s demonstrates a leap forward and marks a move beyond the authors' experiences within Britain to a more global world. *Leave to Stay* (1996), edited by Joan Riley and Briar Wood, is a collection that focuses on the creation of 'new' alliances between writers from various ethnic backgrounds. Kadija-George Sesay's, *Burning Words, Flaming Images* (1996) is an anthology of short stories and poems by writers of African descent. Claiming to be ground-breaking, the collection is introduced by a poem "which acts as both a historical spiritual call to arms and a protective

⁹⁵ London has been the publishing capital of the world and publication of black British literature had thus far been limited to a handful of London-based presses such as Hamish Hamilton and New beacon Books etc. Peepal Tree's distinctiveness lies in its location in the regional multicultural space of Leeds in Yorkshire, away from the 'centre' of London and its ethos of focusing on Black British writing.

shield under which the assembled writers can begin to imagine and discourse the present and the future". (Sesay, 1996)⁹⁶

Among other anthologies of black British literature that followed from the first wave, at the forefront was *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry* edited by Karen McCarthy and published by the Women's Press to coincide with the celebration of the Black History Month in 1998. The collection considers the authors as part of the 'Black' tradition; those dating back to the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and include writers from diverse backgrounds.⁹⁷ The euphoric reception of this anthology by the press at the time is interesting. The *Konch* magazine claimed that:

[Bittersweet] makes it clear that there is a great deal of hunger for the work of these fine multicultural writers in a country whose poetry has been mired in the bog for at least one long generation. These young Black female poets are very much the future of British literature...it's a bittersweet irony that this British poetry which exudes historical awareness and contemporary cultural vibrancy is a gift created by the formerly colonised subjects. (London Today, 2001)

The claim not only asserts the flourishing of new black talents from the contemporary generation, but also highlights the role and importance of black British literature in reviving artistic productions in Britain by women writers from diasporic communities.

⁹⁶ While undertaking a highly ambitious task of amalgamating work from a huge range of writers with diverse "styles, politics and interests", the anthology meets a disappointing outcome. Sharing Onyekachi Wambu's view, it may be argued that many of the works are "flat and unoriginal" and some writers exhibit "historical amnesia of black poetic and literary tradition" by revisiting landscapes and territories extensively dealt with by their predecessors. (Wambu, 1997)

⁹⁷ Some of the poetry comprised in this anthology catalogues the trauma of being raised in a white hegemonic society where 'blackness' is marginalised and betrayal is experienced by children when left isolated by their imagined community of immigrant families. (Chancy, 2001)

The Asian Women Writers' Workshop, later known as Asian Women Writers' Collective discussed at length in the previous chapter was a parallel movement to the existing writer's collectives and provided an arena for Asian women to express their feelings of anger, isolation and trauma as well as find recognition for their writing. Its anthology *Right of Way* published by the Women's Press marked an important advancement for the Collective, as "it not only increased their visibility as a whole but also allowed members who were previously unpublished to develop and promote their own style of writing". (*Right of Way*) Marking its tenth anniversary, the Collective's second anthology *Flaming Spirit* (1994) published by Virago Press made an important contribution. It redefined the term 'Asian' to include women who came from beyond South Asia – such as China, Japan, Korea and so on. The Collective also acted as a foundation which helped launch the careers of Asian women in their chosen field of artistic expression such as journalism, films and theatre.

A corollary to the Asian Women Writer's Collective was the Caribbean Women Writer's Alliance. The latter provided a platform for writers of Caribbean heritage to voice their sentiments, experiences and stimulate creative writing. The Alliance facilitated networking for these writers both nationally and internationally and offered a forum for debating Caribbean women's writing and reinvigorated the contemporary black British literary scene. Its prime aim was to offer visibility to these black women writers, thereby promoting "creative movement outward and upward from constricted and submerged spaces". (Nasta, 2000)

From this analysis we find broad brushstrokes of the ways in which the black and Asian writers have represented their experiences of life in Britain using the anthology as a literary form. The 'anthology' has acted as a platform and tool for these emerging writers to craft their art and voice their experiences in an evolving multicultural Britain, thereby enabling the building of an alternative literary canon, a black British canon. The role of presses in promoting the work of writers from the diaspora has been fundamental to the promotion and conspicuousness of black and Asian writers. Once again, the anthology has performed as an important instrument in upholding the work by these women and showcasing the concealed talents not only to the community but the nation as a whole, both of whom have acted hand in hand to suppress them so far. The movement of these women writers into limelight and the rapid building of the black British canon has since engendered vast transformations in the literary landscape of contemporary Britain. This is not only apparent in the metropolitan 'centre' of London, but also finds manifestation in the various regions of devolved Britain, like the Midlands.

Contemporary black British Writing

Transformations in the black literary scene presented a 'sea change' claims R. Victoria Arana. Paul Gilroy postulates:

the last few years have witnessed the birth of a new cultural and social movement that is broader than merely academic and broader than specifically literary: it is multicultural and multiracial (Anglo-Indian, Anglo-Pakistani, Anglo-Caribbean, Anglo-African) mobilization that is proclaiming itself loudly from hundreds of platforms and stages around the British Isles and popularly and officially styling itself as nothing less magnificent than "Re-inventing Britain".⁹⁸ (Arana, 2004)

⁹⁸ Paul Gilroy, Keynote speech at the international "Re-inventing Britain" conference (March 1997, London, England)

However, such proclamations from different regions of the British Isles away from the metropolitan ‘hub’ of London have been somewhat overlooked in relation to the abundance of articulations from the ‘centre’. This is because the geography of Britain has traditionally provided us with the powerful metaphor of the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ and its analogous assumptions of inclusion and exclusion, dominance and subordination as well as access and denial.⁹⁹ It is my contention that in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this re-invention of Britain around the British Isles, a movement away from the dominant metaphors is necessary, supplanting them with a paradigm shift towards ‘liminality’. I argue that the articulations of new generation multi-ethnic literary and cultural artists from the regions of the Britain, can be best understood through the anthropological concept of ‘liminality’ reflecting the transitions shaping an individual’s temporal, spatial and social experience. New generation Britons, ‘Liminal Britons’ as I term them, increasingly find themselves located in multicultural spaces across Britain where they are compelled to negotiate complexities of existence. They are characterised by a peculiar sense of unity, being neither wholly British nor belonging entirely to their ethnic background, they are something else besides – located in an in-between space. Occupying certain phases within a ‘liminal’ spectrum, these Britons are in constant transition and refract multiplicity of their existence. It is their unique perception of Britishness, resulting from their constantly shifting positioning, that is reflected in their

⁹⁹ Robert Hewison has suggested an alternate metaphor of the ‘net’ of connections, exemplifying Bhabha’s concept of ‘social ethics of proximity’. Hewison’s image contains within it suggestions of “safety, flexibility, not entrapment, and it is institutionally supported at many points”. This is projected as a more equalising stance as through this motif, Hewison argues that “instead of hierarchy, there is equality; instead of domination, communication” which provides a democratic and uniform structure rather than a tiered hierarchy that was in existence in Britain for so many years. (Hewison, 1997)

articulations and have engendered the 'sea-change' that Arana and Hall indicate.

Elucidating the changes in the literary scene in the last two decades, Stuart Hall points to a significant shift in black cultural politics. In his opinion there are two phases of the same movement which "overlap and interweave", both being "framed by the same historical conjuncture and both rooted in politics of antiracism and the post-war black experience in Britain" which have engendered this shift. (Hall, 1996: 163) In an attempt to characterize these moments, Hall contends that the former phase was "grounded in particular political and cultural analysis" when 'black' was used as a generalising term for referencing "common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain" across communities with different "histories, traditions and ethnic identities", consequently relegating blacks to a position at the margins rendering them to the category of the "unspoken and invisible 'other' of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses". This was also the basis of formation of the following phase, which embodies a cultural politics "designed to challenge, resist, and, where possible, transform the dominant regimes of representation". (Hall, 1996:163-4) The work of this new generation of black British writers fashioning a sea-change in the literary landscape, also demonstrates the representation that was upheld by black artists to contest marginality and stereotypical portrayal of black images. Such a stance advocates a "positive black imagery" (p164) which is widely exemplified in their writing.

These 'new breed' of young writers interpret Britain from the perspective of their personal black British experience and are resolute in

asserting that “the future of Britain isas much theirs to decide as anyone’s. It is a birthright”. (Arana, 2004) The “neo-millennial avant-garde” as R. Victoria Arana has branded them, have a subjectivity that is derived from a national belonging that is no longer culturally alienated or intimidated by the ‘white’ gaze. By assuming a more validated right to managing the British socio-political affairs, Arana claims that they have stimulated a movement that is redefining ‘Britishness’. (Arana, 2004)

Designing a new template of what it is to be ‘British’, the distinguishing characteristic of these writers is that, they are in a constant state of flux and the language, themes and imagery used by them are distinct from their predecessors. (Sesay, 2004) Characterised by ‘liminality’, these new generation women have multiple identities which they adopt at various points in their lives in the effort to negotiate existence in contemporary Britain. The literary expressions of these ‘Liminal Britons’, as I would like to call these new generation women writers, are also characterised by such ‘liminality’ as their protagonists often find themselves caught ‘betwixt and between’ different polarities and their lives are engulfed by a ‘complexity and inconsistency of meaning’ as theorised by Turner. Like their authors, they too possess agency and power to challenge and resist hegemonic oppression and are simultaneously disabled and enabled by their predicament. The novelist Andrea Levy suggests: “As black British writers, we are kind of making it up as we go along, we don’t have any sense of something else. *We’ve only got this culture to go on*”. (Sesay, 2004) This assertion reinforces the fact that the new generation already assume themselves to be British

unlike the “middle wave” writers who wrote “largely for a British audience”.¹⁰⁰

This kind of change has been further illuminated by Usha Prajar, the Chair of the Cultural diversity Advisory and Monitoring Committee, who points to a new stage in Britain’s cultural development claiming “a shift from margins to mainstream, from communities to society – and this shift, this transformation, has taken place in the last twenty years”, highlighting its recent reconstruction.¹⁰¹ (Prajar, 1997: 21)

The immense transformative movement stimulated by the ‘neo-millennial consciousness’ of the new generation black and Asian writers has had a profound impact on the literary production in Britain and warranted an expansion of the British literary canon. A consideration of the role of regional presses in disseminating such literature is necessary to gain a clear understanding as to how black British literature has commanded its prominence and gained an entrance into the mainstream literary canon of Britain.

Role of Regional Presses

It is imperative to point out the crucial role played by the regional presses in promoting literary productions from the peripheries of the British Isles. Not only have black writers been excluded by well known literary publishers, regional writing *per se* has been ignored and overlooked to a large extent, making such artistic productions remain as ‘only *part* of the

¹⁰⁰ Andrea Levy, unpublished interview, 1998 in Kadija George Sesay, 2004

¹⁰¹ Quoted from the Arts Council of England’s Consultative Green Paper titled, *The Landscape of Fact, Towards a Policy for Cultural Diversity for the English Funding System*. This Green Paper was the first part of a process whose aim was to develop a national policy toward cultural diversity. In July 1994, the Arts Council agreed to the establishment of a Cultural Diversity Advisory and Monitoring Committee whose responsibilities would include the development of a policy for “Black and Asian arts”.

fabric, not (part of) *the* national fabric' of Britain. (Hewison, 1997) The Midlands and Birmingham in particular, has been one of the most culturally diverse regions within UK, comprising an eclectic mix of cultures and heritages, especially the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean. Like its people, the literary culture has been equally diverse, being reflected in a unique fusion of ideas and talents and demonstrating a rootedness to the geography of the region. The allure and predominance of the metropolitan 'centre' of London has meant that the regional 'margins' have been ignored. Despite Birmingham having been accorded the status of Britain's second city, the diversity and talent of writers from different cultural backgrounds who have used the literary space of the Midlands, have remained largely unnoticed. Such neglect of the regional literary output has necessitated the sprouting of regional presses whose prime aim and focus has been to publish and promote work specifically by writers from the region.

The chosen anthologies, *Whispers in the Walls* (2001)¹⁰² and *Her Majesty* (2002) are published by Tindal Street Press, an award-winning independent regional publishing house specialising in offering its readers the best in contemporary literature from the Midlands region. Being a small publishing concern, it aims to provide "a national and international platform for talented new writers from the English regions". (Tindal Street Press) The press grew out of the Tindal Street Fiction Group founded in Birmingham in 1993. With the aid of funding, there was an increase in publishing activity in 2002 which affirmed its aim to "raise Birmingham's cultural profile, showcase

¹⁰² Henceforth *Whispers in the Walls* will be referred to with the abbreviation *WITW*.

new writers and build a readership for good, locally set fiction". (Tindal Street Press)

There has been a lot of acclaim for this small independent publisher, especially from reputed newspaper critics who have argued that "The company has an ability to mine local talent, even when their authors' biographies don't ooze glamour" and that "there are aspiring authors all over the country writing stories between night shifts, but only in Birmingham, it seems, does anyone pay attention". (Segal, 2008) In support of this view, Yvonne Brissett, the co-editor of the anthology *WITW* and a broadcast journalist at the BBC, stated in an interview:

Most writers find that if they want to be published they have to reach out to London. The fantastic thing about Tindal Street is that they're based here and (are) particularly interested in Birmingham writers. (Cross, 2001)

This intention to focus on writers from the region is primarily two-fold. As explained by Alan Mahar, the Publishing Director of Tindal Street Press, there is a degree of chauvinism involved in promoting talent from the Midlands in order to highlight pride in regional writing and to contest the negative profile that the region receives nationally. (Mahar, 2008) Mahar points to the prejudice in favour of writing away from the hub of London, one that has remained marginal through the years and has been undermined by London-centric productions. The second, perhaps equally important reason is based on funding. For a relatively small literary publisher, sustenance is reliant on funding from the Arts Council. Although no restrictions are placed on the publisher about work to be published, there is an implied insistence by the Arts Council on major proportion of the activity to engage regional writers and artists and promote diversity. Moreover, the Birmingham City Council

also has a crucial role to play in governing funding for Tindal Street publications coupled with an explicit objective to promote regional work in all publications. (Mahar, 2008)

It is evident from Mahar's avowal that there is a symbiotic relation between the desire to promote regional work and availability of funds. The existence of a small literary publisher is largely dependent on the access to funds, whether it is from governmental sources or non-governmental agencies. Very often the accessibility of funds is tied in with specific agendas and unless they match the publisher's mission, it is difficult to obtain finance. In Tindal Street's case we witness a happy coincidence of the Arts Council and Birmingham City Council's specific strategy to promote diversity and regional work, but as the new Coalition government's Spending Review confirms, such schemes may be transitory and jeopardise the existence of local and regional presses.

Heaventree Press is another regional press based in the Midlands. The Coventry-based press is dedicated to publishing new writing, especially poetry, as there is an ongoing 'crisis' in the sales of poetry by new and unestablished writers who are excluded by mainstream production houses.¹⁰³ The fact was highlighted in a conference at Warwick University, "Crisis in Poetry Publishing" held in 2002 and the press germinated from a pressing need to address the problem underscored at the conference. As mentioned on the publisher's homepage, their main aim is:

¹⁰³ Due to the flood of poetry from all quarters, commercial publishers consider poetry to be financially non-viable. While some major publishing houses have closed off their poetry lists altogether, there are others that tend to concentrate solely on established names, thereby creating an elite core adorning the bookshelves in major stores.

to give the poetry to the public, where we can, for as little as possible. We are doing our best to produce books and magazines at an affordable price, drawing in funding and subsidies. Where we do make some profit, we will channel the money back into providing more poetry, art, literature and music for Coventry and the West Midlands. (Heaventree Press)

Like Tindal Street Press, Heaventree's intention is also to promote new writing from the region and its sustenance is based on funding from the Arts Council and other specific initiatives targeted to encourage local talent to present their work, expressions that would otherwise disappear due to negligence of mainstream publishing houses and low-budget marketing campaigns.

Some other regional publishing houses from the British regions are the Comma Press based in Manchester and Flambard based in the North-East. Like the Midlands-based presses, Comma Press also started as part of an artist's' group in 2002 and focuses on the publication of new fiction and poetry, with an emphasis on short stories. With a similar objective of showcasing new talent, Comma's acclaim lies in its attempt to transform its project of short-story booklets on four cities – Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Bradford – into a series of book-length anthologies, commencing with *The Book of Leeds* and *The Book of Liverpool*.¹⁰⁴ The Newcastle – upon – Tyne based Flambard Press is another regional press “nurturing new and neglected writers from Britain and beyond”. (Flambard Press) Despite being a predominantly poetry publisher, Flambard also publishes fiction and is especially supportive of the writers from the northern regions of England as well as those who are overlooked by the mainstream publishers.

¹⁰⁴ Both books bring together fiction by celebrated writers from their respective cities and trace transitions in the milieu of the city brought about by economic and social changes through the decades. They explore questions of what ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ mean in the context of the particular city, and the stories are situated against the backdrop of larger events shaping the city's history.

Peepal Tree Press, based in the multicultural part of Leeds, is perhaps the oldest and most well established press beyond London. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, their publications are concerned with Black British and South Asian writing, particularly those based in diasporic or UK setting, and the goal is to “publish books that make a difference”. (Peepal Tree Press)

The growth and existence of such regional presses are a reflection of the beginning of a shift in the spotlight from London-centric literary production to a more regional focus. There has been a significant literary tradition in the different peripheries of Britain but unfortunately, parochialism of the metropolitan centre has prevented attention to literary work from the regions. In the endeavour to ‘re-invent’ Britain, by celebrating multiracialism and through the efforts of the small publishing houses in some regions, the literary productions from specific regions of UK is being brought into the limelight. However, the fact that the local presses have to rely so heavily on grants and funding from the Arts Councils and respective City Councils is testimony to the fact that not enough is being done to restore the equilibrium between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ and the links between the ‘net’ of connections are still highly tenuous. In the absence of devolution of resources to the peripheries, it is erroneous to envisage a clear reflection of the literary talent in the regions of Britain. In spite of the political transformation ensuing following the delivery of devolution in 1997, the national and global platform for literary expression will remain uneven and unequal if the dearth of support persists for these small struggling establishments endeavouring to showcase local talent.

Locating the Midlands

The Midlands has developed as a centre for prolific literary and artistic production over the years. The aim of this section is to examine and explore the vast array of cultural diversity in the centre of England and the specific ways in which 'blackness' can be perceived in the Midlands, as differently nuanced from a generalised blackness. It questions how the context of devolved black Britain and recent transformations engendered by attempts to re-invent Britain inflect the perception of multiculturalism and 'Britishness' from the peripheries through a reading of selected short stories from the chosen anthologies. In the previous chapter I have discussed novels as a literary form for such articulations. In this section, the texts discussed are in the form of anthologies of short stories - *Whispers in the Walls* (2001) edited by Leonne Ross and Yvonne Brissett and *Her Majesty* (2002) edited by Emma Hargrave and Jackie Gay, both published by the Birmingham-based Tindal Street Press. The chosen anthologies evidence how new generation black and Asian women writers in the Midlands have created an artistic space for themselves using this literary form.

The anthology *Whispers in the Walls – New Black and Asian Voices from Birmingham* is a 'regional anthology' containing seventeen short stories not just about Birmingham or the Midlands but specifically about black and Asian Birmingham. A Tindal Street Press release referred to "its characteristically forthright Birmingham flavour" that "brings together voices grounded in the life of a modern multicultural city". (Tindal Street Press , 2001) As stated in the Introduction of the book, the writing included in this

anthology is a culmination of a series of community-based writer's workshops "held at community venues across Birmingham" that were run in collaboration with the Millenibrum Project. (*WITW*, 2001) The work fits in with Tindal Street Press's commitment towards promoting the cultural enhancement of Birmingham through developing writers with their "raw, unheard voices" and a widening readership of locally produced literary expressions.

Alan Mahar, the Publishing Editor of the press claims that from its inception, there was a persistent intention of the press to publish works by black and Asian writers from the region as it was in keeping with Birmingham's identity. (Mahar, 2008) Moreover, the number of publishers specialising in the publication of works by black and Asian writers was dwindling at the end of the 1990s owing to low readership which, in his opinion, justified the project more powerfully.¹⁰⁵ However, the aim was difficult to achieve due the shortage of appropriate publishing staff within the press. This necessitated a lot of specifically directed workshops and networking which had to be implemented in order to realise the desired outcome. New and relatively unestablished black editors were chosen for the black and Asian productions, according to Mahar, as it was deemed inappropriate for white editors to do justice to these projects. (Mahar, 2008)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Following the Rushdie Affair of the late 1980s coupled with the stringent policies of the Conservative regime, the wave of multiculturalism was facing a demise in the 1990s until the advent of the 'New Labour' and a Blairite government engendering optimism with its concept of 'Cool Britannia' at the end of the decade.

¹⁰⁶ It was felt that having shared similar predicament, black editors would have greater empathy with the writers articulating their specific experiences of Britishness.

The genre of the short story is a good self-enclosed form for developing writers to use and explore and provides new writers with the important 'first step' towards expressing their ideas of 'Britishness'. It also enables them to explore their black British identity and embark on a writing career. A select group of established and emerging writers features in *WITW* to provide multiple and diverse voices of people from the Midlands, a 'liminal' location of Britain. As outlined in the Introduction, the Midlands itself can be perceived to be occupying a 'liminal' location in terms of its geographic positioning. Dominant discourses of the North-South divide, renders the Midlands in a space 'betwixt and between'. The landscape of the region is "neither this nor that, and yet is both" as theorised by Turner. (Turner, 1967: 99) Sharing features with both halves of Britain, the Midlands is characterised by its own distinctiveness, which is similar yet different to both. Influenced by political, economic and historical conditions, the region is marked by a peculiar unity which makes it distinct from the others. Possessing fluid boundaries, the region is also relieved from normative constraints, thereby engendering it with new possibilities.

In an interview Yvonne Brissett points out that the main editorial focus behind the choice of the seventeen stories was high quality of writing with compelling storylines, narrated by great story tellers. (Brissett, 2009) In the opinion of one of the contributors to the collection, Tindal Street has not only been very audacious in publishing works by such new writers but also in being the "first to take a defiantly regional stance". Norman Samuda-Smith, a writer in the book asserts the merit of this volume by claiming that "This

anthology is educational for those not from the Asian or Caribbean community, and for us it looks at where we are today". (Cross, 2001)

In the selected anthologies, conventional stereotypes are exploded in favour of unusual and exciting themes that are part of contemporary life in a large multi-ethnic city. In a review of the collection, Simon Fletcher points out that, "these writers are ... feeling their situations intensely". (Fletcher, 2002) The variety and uniqueness evidenced in this collection only reaffirms my initial argument that the 'anthology' as a literary form enables writers to voice their diverse feelings and experiences and thereby express their 'Britishness' in the context of a devolved black Britain. It provides them with the necessary artistic space to articulate their experiences of negotiating life in this particular multicultural location of contemporary Britain.

The anthology *Her Majesty* (2002) consists of twenty-one short stories written by multi-ethnic women but unlike the previous collection it is not simply by writers from the West Midlands but from other regions of the United Kingdom. It gained inception through an event showcasing the talent of women short story writers in the city which received overwhelming response from the Birmingham audience, impressed by the range of voices and perspectives of these writers. Following the success of *WITW*, and the continued tradition of short story writing in the city, the publishers were encouraged to believe that there is a good reception for such collections in Birmingham. Apart from the less significant regional connection, the uniqueness of *HM* lies in the fact that it contains stories not merely from previously unpublished writers but also well established authors who have published their works through mainstream publishing houses. The existence

of named authors in an anthology, claims Mahar, helps in the marketing and sales of a book and provides an opportunity for emerging writers to share a platform with them and gain prominence.¹⁰⁷ (Mahar, 2008)

Real life is represented in the anthology through powerful memoirs using fictional techniques. Use of contemporary themes and issues is commonplace in the fiction and authors try to make sense of their lives through fictionalising them. Mirroring the previous collection, the authors in this anthology not only observe lives closely by zooming in but also step back to obtain a wider angle, spotlighting all inconsistencies of life within the home and the community outside which would have otherwise remained unnoticed and overlooked. The editors of the collection contend, “The stories in ‘*Her Majesty*’ are adventures of the spirit; characters don’t set out to conquer the earth but they do dare to open up worlds that might otherwise remain closed to them.” (*HM*, p8) This is imperative to the focus of this anthology, as the writer Ali Smith argues – “We need to know what happens” in the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres, behind closed doors of the homes and in the community at large, and without this insight and exposure, women remain powerless and subjugated. (p8)

In *HM*, we not only find evidence of the feminist practice of reclaiming the past by fictionalising it, but also the desire and attempts to grapple with the hazy present and uncertain future. The genre of the short story acts as a suitable vehicle for delivering the possibilities of “here and now” and capturing the episodic and fragmented lives of contemporary existence of

¹⁰⁷ Authors such as Liza Cody, Ali Smith, Annie Murray and Donna Clarke are well known in publishing circles and have previously gained success through their stories and novels outside the region.

new generation Britons. Their existence is characterised by moments of change and hence reliance on maps and predetermined routes for guidance are futile. Instead, through the narratives the writers “illuminate the tensive web of politics, economics, families and relationships upon which we are all poised” in the twenty-first century. (p9) Living up to its title and its overarching theme, at the end of the stories, the protagonists, mainly women, emerge majestic, “optimistic, energetic and vital”, attributes characteristic of new generation British women, who seem ready to encounter and negotiate whatever contemporary British life throws at them. (p10)¹⁰⁸

Some themes woven through the tapestry of the stories in these anthologies include the familiar theme of identity and belonging both in the ‘private’ and ‘public’ space that is upheld in a new light. The idea of ‘home’ in Birmingham is explored in a number of stories as is the theme of not only belonging to a society but also owning it. Unlike the writing of the previous generation, we find here a grappling with issues that are specific to one’s own community – Asian or Caribbean. As the selected stories from both collections comprise stories by women writers, how black and Asian women engage with and negotiate the unequal positions of power in life and work in contemporary Britain features strongly in most cases. Such experiences are particular to Birmingham in *WITW*. How racism affects identity and belonging is another theme that is explored in majority of the stories in this collection. The narratives illustrate how characters tackle the comfortless weight of

¹⁰⁸ The ‘liminal’ existence of these new generation women enables them to be simultaneously liberated and empowered, rendering an optimism lacking among black and Asian women of the previous generation.

history – with its cruel traditions, economic migrations, and make brave choices to determine their futures. The focus of this analysis however, will not be to provide an overview of the stories in the anthologies, nor concentrate on the conventional themes of diasporic writing but to explore and highlight how ‘blackness’ has been expressed in the Midlands through certain predominant metaphors used by the ‘neo-millennial’ writers in the selected short stories in both anthologies. It is this new generation of writers, who I wish to conceptualise as ‘Liminal Britons’, that express diverse and multiple voices through the literary form of the anthology in order to communicate their ‘Britishness’ from the regional peripheries of UK.

The title *WITW* originally formed the title of one of the short stories by Naylah Ahmed. The name functions as a potent metaphor of the ‘liminal’ existence of black and Asian communities in a large multi-cultural city. ‘Whispers’, as the Introduction of the book suggests, can have numerous meanings and connotations – they can be viewed negatively as weapons for destruction of others’ wellbeing, a powerful and inexorable force for disseminating information, an expression of discomfort and dissatisfaction, a precursor to impending activities, a source of miscommunication; they can also be viewed positively as a medium for communicating with others, sharing joy and sorrow and an instrument to engage with one’s inner voice as one journeys through life. However, the title in this context perhaps has greater significance in encapsulating the history of the black and Asian experience in a British metropolis where the truth of the condition of ‘black’ women’s identity and existence is explicated through their writing.

From the commencement of migration into this city since the post-1945 period, the black and Asian population have always been whispered about, echoing people's curiosity and ignorance leading to prejudice and snide remarks. However, 'whispers' may also be perceived to be couched in fear and caution, mirroring the situation migrants often find themselves in - a state of fear of being under constant surveillance. They are unable to assert their multiple identities in a 'multicultural' nation which professes to promote tolerance and celebrate equality and diversity. The metaphor of 'walls' in the title also refers to the marginalised positioning of these individuals who live within the walls of the city yet consider themselves at the periphery, waiting to step out of the confines of an oppressive system and find their own domain. The 'walls' bring into focus Stuart Hall's concept of a 'border' metaphor which advocates the standpoint of "people moving in and out of borders constructed around co-ordinates of difference and power". (Hall, 1995) The walls are also markers of the boundary of cultures, classes, ethnicities and genders from where key questions can be posed. As explained by Bromley, they are an apt marker because walls mark the boundaries "where the 'taken for granted' of identity formation is most put at risk". (Bromley, 2000: 3) The anthology *WITW* provides an opportunity for these 'whispers' to be put on stage within and beyond the borders of the walls so that they reveal how 'Britishness' has been redefined in the culturally diverse peripheries of Britain.

Identity is a seminal factor in redefining 'Britishness' and is strongly influenced by debates related to migration, globalisation, Britain's demise as an imperial power and especially in case of the black population in Britain,

the issue of racism. The latter has significantly impacted on the relationship of the black and Asian population of Britain in shaping their idea of 'Britishness' and has given rise to various forms of resistance. As reiterated before, writing, like some other forms of cultural production, is a crucial form of articulation of different forms of identity (in this case, black identity) and for exploring the kind of spaces they occupy within Britain. (Weedon, 2008)

Writing about new Caribbean cinema in an essay "Cultural identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall discusses the issue of identity by suggesting that the recent diasporic black cultural production is "putting the issue of cultural identity in question". "Who," he asks, "is this emergent, new subject of the cinema? From where does he/she speak?" (Hall, 1990; 222) Based on Hall's concerns, Weedon asks similar questions in relation to black British literature about the subject of the writing, highlighting the importance of creative practices in the production of identities *per se* and not merely as reflections of an existing black identity. (Weedon, 2004: 76) Hall clarifies his questions about identity (which are also applicable in case of literature) by arguing that:

There are at least two different ways of thinking about "cultural identity". The first position defines "cultural identity" in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective one true self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. (Hall, 1993)¹⁰⁹

If viewed from this perspective, Hall's interpretation of 'cultural identity' is true in case of a number of African - centric discourses where identity is deeply rooted in their African heritage. However, Hall offers a further approach to the question of black identity:

¹⁰⁹ Hall expands on the definition by claiming that "our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provide us, as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our cultural history". (Hall, 1993)

This second position recognises that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference, which constitute “what we really are”, or rather – since history has intervened – “what we have become.” ... Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.¹¹⁰ (Hall, 1993)

It is this second approach which sees identity as part of a dynamic process undergoing constant transformation that is exemplified in the writing of the new generation black British writers.

In an attempt to move beyond Hall's approach, I would like to assert that the identity of new generation of Britons is marked by a 'liminal' positioning, an in-between space characterised by ambiguity, complexity and multiplicity, as theorised by anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. The multiple positioning of the 'black' British identities (black used in the earlier generalised sense) is more akin to Turner's concept of 'liminality' where he defines the 'liminal' as a period “when the individual is neither what he has been nor what he will be. Characteristic of the 'liminal' period is the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning...”. (Turner, 1983: 113) I contend that during this time and process of transformation, an individual is in occupation of a 'liminal' space where 'anything may happen', engendering new possibilities. Extending Turner's notion, I propose that inhabitation of this kind of a transitional space within a 'liminal' spectrum, living multiple existences, stepping aside from one's own social position and forming alternative social arrangements, is what contributes to the unique

¹¹⁰ Hall contends that “It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything, which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are continually subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.” (Hall, 1993)

complexity, plurality and heterogeneity of the British-born generation of black and Asian identities. The anxiety resulting from this condition is balanced by exhilaration in the freedom that it affords, making it a simultaneously enabling and disabling experience. This emphasis on freedom, regeneration and renewal indicates an expansion of Turner's concept and makes my conception of 'multi-liminality' a much broader and encompassing concept than the original anthropological concept or Bhabha's 'hybirdity'. I argue that this concept is more relevant in case of these anthologies due to the 'liminal' positioning of the characters located in the 'liminal' region of the Midlands.

'Being' and 'becoming' suggested by Hall are some crucial alterations which take place in diasporic identities, and is evidenced in case of second generation migrants emerging as 'black British' or 'British Asian'. Multiplicity and heterogeneity is their defining characteristic. Transforming and shifting positions within a 'liminal' spectrum imparts a unique quality to each individual which finds reflection in the selected short stories in *WITW* and *HM*. The transformations that have taken place among the 'Liminal Britons' in this Midlands region of Britain is an aspect that is worth exploring through an examination of rising voices in the two anthologies. Positioned in a 'liminal' location spatially and geographically, these Britons from the Midlands provide an alternate perspective of multiculturalism in Britain from the peripheries and beyond the 'centre' of London.

The Midlands is at the heart of the anthologies as all the stories are located within its landscape or are designed primarily for the regional readership. The walls of the city of Birmingham, its urban and domestic geography, provide the backdrop for the dramas in the stories in *WITW* to

develop and bind them together into a distinctive collection. Birmingham is not just a fixed location or uni-dimensional location on a map but is conceived as a place of imagination, a fictional universe represented imaginatively by the authors. However, touches of real locations make the stories more colourful, injecting life into them and imbuing them with a certain kind of realism. Certain locations within the city, such as The Bull Ring, Birmingham's iconic shopping centre; Handsworth Park, an unusual strip of greenery sandwiched between the deprived housing estates populated by migrants; Harborne, a white-dominated suburb of the city; Coventry Road, the arterial route joining the two multicultural cities of Birmingham and Coventry etc. hold distinct experiences and memories of the inhabitants hailing from the 'minority communities' and they resurface repeatedly from a variety of perspectives in the stories. "The city itself is a motif" claim the editors of *WITW* and "the tales are unflinching" revealing the strength of the characters and the complexity of life in a multicultural city. (*WITW*, p10)

In conjunction with the sociological shifts in multi-ethnic British society, we witness a distinct literary shift by the "neo-millennial avant-garde", as Arana christens the writers of the new generation. (Arana, 2004) The imagery and themes in their writing are different from their predecessors and more suited to jostle with modern dilemmas. Unlike traditional diasporic writing, we do not find a preoccupation with themes of home and exile, (un)belonging and racial discrimination. In order to tackle the complexities of contemporary existence, we find the authors in these short stories using conventional metaphors in a new, re-signified fashion to voice their everyday experiences. Traditional metaphors of 'Letters', the 'street', particularly within

the location of Birmingham, and 'food', have all been re-oriented and rendered new through modern associations, featuring powerfully in the stories in both collections and function effectively to convey the existence of distinctive 'blackness' in the Midlands.

Letters have been used as a fictional tool in literary history since the eighteenth century. Historically, it has been figured as a trope of intimacy and authenticity and commonplace in women's writing. Speaking about Olga Kenyon's anthology *Eight Hundred Years of Women's Letters*, PD James writes that the dynamics of correspondence can be described as "the intimacy of heart and mind speaking to heart and mind across distance and across time". (James, 1992) Although subject to a lot of critical reflection since the 1980s, the 'letter' has continued to be an important temporal and spatial metaphor encapsulating the voices and feelings of characters across time and space. Considered to be a familiar trope in women's writing, letters are a powerful tool in the short stories within the selected anthologies and play an important role in echoing the voices and intimate feelings of the characters located in the Midlands.

The 'letter' has been used as the central metaphor and plot device to narrate the story of a couple Nico and Munchie Samuels recently emigrated to the UK and settled in Birmingham in Maeve Clarke's 'Letters a Yard'. A writer born and bred in Birmingham and of Jamaican parentage, Clarke's short story is comprised of a series of letters written from Birmingham to back home or 'yard' (as Jamaicans popularly refer to their homeland) as a means of looking back at the period of migration in the late 50s and early 60s. In this inaugural story of the collection *WITW*, we find a Jamaican's

reading of Birmingham and a reference to the historical episode of migration into the Midlands through the metaphor of the letter. This fictional evocation of earlier black history is an important part of “reclaiming a sense of history and tradition that allows for positive identities in the present” enabling this story to be an apt foundation on which the stories of the new generation Britons unfurl and develop in the anthology. (Weedon, 2004)

“The epistolary form remains potent and supple in contemporary fiction,” claims Lauri Ramey in a book review on the anthology. “It is used to beautiful effect” she continues, “to depict the distances, and the potential for words to form at least partial connections, when home is away”. (Ramey, 2002) The story unfolds in the form of letters spanning twenty nine years from Munchie living in Birmingham to her mother and daughter Laura back in Jamaica interspersed with conversations with the family residing in England in the early 1960s. The use of the ‘letter’ as a fictional instrument enables the author to straddle between two worlds – that of the life of an immigrant in Birmingham (England) and that of life back ‘home’ in Jamaica based on memory and demonstrates the complexity of being caught ‘betwixt and between’. Interestingly, the last letter comes from the mother in Jamaica to a daughter in Birmingham, depicting “the complex circularity of immigrant situation”. (*WITW*, p65)

The ‘letter’ is also instrumental in revealing dichotomies encountered by immigrants trying to start a new life in the “Mother Country”. While attempting to grapple with an idealistic dream of a prosperous life in the now post-imperial ‘Motherland’, the characters face immense complexities as they endeavour to negotiate the new culture and raise children. It is through the

letter that Clarke is looking back at the early years of migration from the Caribbean and fictionalises the older generation migrants struggling with alienation and marginality. These migrants and older generation characters in the story exemplify the 'being' identities theorised by Hall and undergo transformation into 'becoming' identities. As settled inhabitants (the 'becoming' identities in Hall's contention) of a multicultural city, they aim to promote equality and diversity among all residents. Children of these older generation migrants, the new generation Britons, are perceived to have moved beyond the problems encountered by their parents and identify themselves as British. This emphasis on new generation characters in black British literature "*belonging* to a new society, on *owning* it" as asserted by Kadija Sesay, is what distinguishes these pieces from the contemporary literatures of Africa and the Caribbean. (Sesay, 2004) This transformation from 'being' to 'becoming' and shifting of positions within a 'liminal' spectrum, are parts of re-inventing the authentic black British identity, and is very succinctly upheld in the first story by Maeve Clarke through the metaphor of the letter.

Letters are also bearers of promises. Promises are a kind of oath, a pledge, an assurance, an agreement and even an expectation of something. Promises are expected to be maintained and respected but on several occasions they emerge broken and shattered into smithereens. In some of the selected stories in the anthology, we find the expression of 'promise' in its assorted forms but none more robustly as the opening story. In *Letters a Yard*, promise reveals itself in different levels, forms and magnitude. There is a promise of the prosperous colonial motherland to its suffering colonial

subjects: a promise of success and wealth to a generation of West Indian youth Nico and Munchie who decide to immigrate to the UK. However, we learn through correspondences in the form of letters that the promise of success is hampered for the couple by the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications in the 'promised land' of England. Despite being professionally qualified, Nico being a trained accountant and Munchie a trained nurse, the couple face immense disappointment as they are forced to accept jobs of a bus conductor and an auxiliary nurse respectively. The disheartened Munchie reports in a letter to her mother:

I get a job in the hospital, not the one I did want because Jamaican training not the same as English training. I tell them sick people is sick people But them don't listen. So many people go for this nursing auxiliary job – I lucky to get it. (*WITW*, p15)

Here the 'letter' acts as a fictional tool to provide commentary on the typical immigrant situation in the late 1950s and early 60s Britain when black and Asian immigrants were compelled to compromise their skills for non-skilled jobs.

Another promise revealed through the letters in the short story is that of Munchie to her mother regarding their return back 'home'/ 'yard' to Jamaica in five years time after financial prosperity in the "Mother Country". At the very start of the story we find Munchie assuring her mother in a letter: "If everything go alright we will be able to come home in five years like we plan and build the house of our dreams".(p13) This promise of returning home to Jamaica is sadly unfulfilled in the course of the three decades that Munchie and Nico spend in the UK. The promise is not invoked till 1985, towards the end of their stay, when Munchie reiterates to her mother "God

willing me soon come home” (p26) and then restates in the following letter in 1987 “Shouldn’t be too long before I come home” (p28) and finally at the very end when she writes resignedly “Nico say is time we go home... I tired ... I work too hard all me life. Is my time come now. We arriving December 15th, in time for Christmas”.(p29-30) Here the ‘promise’ relates to the typical immigrant’s desire to go back to his/her own homeland which is steadfast at the start but begins to wane with the passage of time. This breach of promise is brilliantly captured by the story which demonstrates the process of transformation that immigrant’s undergo through the use of positive and negatively phrased sentences. The firm commitment to return home at the beginning alters with the increasing complexities of life in Britain; it weakens the promise and the desire becomes clouded by negativity – “God willing, “Shouldn’t be too long”. At the end of their stay however, their views are transformed and evidenced in the use of positive verbs – “we go”, “We arriving”, “come now”. Stuart Hall claims that being ‘immigrants’, the way in which many black people in European centres are marked, “places one so equivocally as *really* belonging *somewhere else*”. (Hall, 1985) Therefore, the intention or act of going back home completes the rhetorical gesture.

Using the metaphor of the letter, we are also informed in this story about a ‘promise’ that remains unfulfilled - the promise of a mother to her baby daughter Laura. From the outset we are informed through letters that the couple will soon send for their daughter to join the family in England. Munchie is remorseful for having left her behind in Jamaica and continues to send gifts and money for Laura at regular intervals. We learn from Munchie’s frequent letters to her mother that she endeavours to send money secretly

even when her husband Nico is displeased about it. Nico holds no regard for his daughter and only looks forward to his English-born children, especially sons, who he feels will be people to 'reckon with' and make him proud. The dominant ideology of gender roles in black families is maintained in case of Munchie's family but with a difference. Being in a position of relative powerlessness in a white-British society, Nico can only assert his control and dominance over his own family, and is therefore quick to espouse the attitude of those who are powerful. The imposed inferiority and the inability to break-free from the patriarchal stranglehold of the family consequently results not only in the breach of 'promise' between mother and daughter but also an unfulfilled relationship.

The letter features in Clarke's story as the thread that joins together the various strands illustrating multiple experiences of black and Asian identities with the figure of Munchie, the protagonist of the story, at the centre. The way in which she negotiates relationships with husband, children, mother and colleagues/neighbours are demonstrative of the separation and transition phases of the 'liminal' position she occupies within the spectrum of 'liminality' characterising the condition of black and Asian women in contemporary Britain.¹¹¹ It is also worth noting that in its intermeshing of family problems with community issues, contemporary black British fiction differs from the writing of the Windrush generation whose

¹¹¹ The complexity involved in the negotiation of relationships in Munchie's life makes her positioning far more problematic than merely the kind of in-between position advocated by Bhabha. One of the major charges against Bhabha is his elision of differential socio-economic positioning of individuals influencing power inequality between the interlocutors along with their negotiating abilities. 'Liminality' thus becomes a more viable paradigm to describe Munchie's complex positioning.

narratives were closer to documentary realism and the characters had a lack of family context.

In the short story 'One Last Time' by Kavita Bhanot, the letter in the form of a wedding invitation plays a pivotal role in the story. Set in Birmingham, the story relates the tale of a young Asian doctor, Meghna Kureishi, pondering over the wedding invitation of her ex-boyfriend Sunil Dutta. Placing the letter of invitation at the centre, Bhanot draws a circle of events around it with her compass of compelling story-telling. A young writer born in London and resident in Birmingham for a considerable length of time, Bhanot made her writing debut through this short story.

Attempting to represent the modern generation of black and Asian Britons in a new light, Bhanot crafts the story so that memories radiate from the prism of the letter. Though deviating from a traditional letter, the invitation, requesting the pleasure of the company of Meghna at the marriage ceremony of Sunil acts as the central metaphor through which the story is narrated in flashback. Using the cinematic technique, Bhanot discusses issues of home and location affecting new generation of Britons and the way in which they contend with their particular situations.

The protagonist, a young doctor, is a key transformation from the stereo-typical post-war immigrant women who were quick to settle into the working class population as sweat-shop workers or homeworkers, nonchalantly oppressed by their employers and possessing no rights at all.¹¹²

¹¹² Wilson provides a detailed study of the Asian women workers in Britain and the industrial scene at the time. She contends that there was a sub-class of workers who were far inferior to the indigenous working class women and generally found employment as sweatshop

(Wilson, 1978) Instead, what we find here is a second-generation Asian woman who is sophisticated, independent, educated and qualified as a medical practitioner. Being British-born and educated, she is not required to encounter problems that first generation migrants like Munchie had to suffer when she first arrived in the UK from Jamaica. In fact, Meghna is a middle-class single and independent woman not subject to the kind of overt domination that previous generation working-class Asian women had to confront.

Behind the façade of independence however, gender and religion are two forces that work strongly to challenge her identity and self-belief. She is in love with a man who deeply values his parent's wishes. Dominated by an orthodox and patriarchal mind-set, Meghna is viewed in a highly derogatory light by Sunil's family – not only is she of the weaker sex but also of a different religion, a Muslim. As mentioned before, here we witness a departure from the previous concerns in black writing because now there is a preoccupation of grappling with issues not only in the society but within one's own community.

In contrast to the letter of invitation, an anonymous slanderous letter acts powerfully to destroy Meghna's prospects of marriage to Sunil. His unashamed disavowal of any relation with Meghna challenges her self-belief and identity. Sunil's deceitful attitude and his portrayal of her as a crazy person places him in the stereotypical role of the oppressive male and

workers and homeworkers. These women were often denied any rights by their employers and were forced to work under appalling conditions.

reduces Meghna's position to an object of recreation, to be enjoyed or discarded as required.¹¹³

However, Meghna soon succeeds in realising the truth through self-introspection. She recognises his need for fabrication –

He had to let his parents think that. He always had a weak spot for them, said he could never hurt them. He wasn't strong enough to stand up to them, to grab the lifeline I threw out to him. (p49)

This insight into his limitations, his weaknesses, his powerlessness, instantly affirms to her, her own strength, power and integrity that she had begun questioning. It also intensifies her desire to catch one last glimpse of him at his wedding to reinforce her self-belief and move beyond the position where she found herself entrapped.

The 'street' emerges as powerful metaphor in a number of short stories and refracts multiple meanings. It may be conceived as a metaphor of the 'liminal' space where an individual may find oneself located at a certain point in their life. Different locations within the street can be envisaged as different phases occupied by new generation Britons within a 'liminal' spectrum. The dynamism, fluidity and multiplicity suggested by the metaphor of the 'street' are also indicative of the distinctive 'liminal' attributes of characters in the stories within this collection.

In 'Letters a Yard' the immigrant couple Nico and Munchie settle in Birmingham following their arrival into the UK from Jamaica. Their existence is narrativised through their intrinsic links to different 'streets' of the city.

¹¹³ Parallels may be drawn with Randhawa's novel *A Wicked Old Woman* discussed in the previous chapter where both Caroline and Kuli had been regarded as commodities by their male oppressors.

Soon after arrival however, their idealistic dreams are rudely shattered as they realise that “The streets of Birmingham not paved with gold like them tell you at home and the city ugly”.(p15) As cited in the Introduction through Stuart Hall’s quotation , the colonial imagination was swamped by colourful and prosperous images of the imperial motherland. Munchie’s avowal of the ‘streets paved with gold’ is thus not a fanciful assumption but a product of intense belief and a major impetus behind their migration to the United Kingdom. However, the myth of the ‘ideal’ colonial Motherland is exposed rapidly leading the disillusioned Nico to conclude before long “Cho! England is a bitch!” (p15)¹¹⁴

Specific locations within this large multicultural city play a major role in the lives of the couple and significant events are connected to distinct areas or streets, having positive or negative impact on their lives. While on the one hand, the streets are a reinforcement of disillusionment on the other, they are symbolic of a new beginning in their lives in Britain. When Nico and Munchie are in quest of “exactly the right house” to settle in, we hear of Nico scouring through the ‘streets’ of “Handsworth, Bearwood and Smethwick”, the immigrant quarters of the city. (p19) These areas were and to a large extent still are, the typical inner-city ghettos where the immigrants were forced to crowd in the face of severe housing shortage of the late 60s and early 70s Birmingham. Eventually we find them selecting a house in Harborne, a

¹¹⁴ Viewing from a ‘liminal’ perspective, the couple may be seen to be occupying the ‘separation’ phase of the liminal spectrum. As suggested by Van Gennep, ‘liminality’ can be categorised into three distinct phases where individuals may find themselves located – separation, transition and reassimilation. Having left their ‘homeland’ of Jamaica and trying to establish an existence in the British ‘motherland’, the couple are undergoing the ‘separation’ phase in their lives where they are located ‘betwixt and between’ two cultures and contexts. At this point, they are neither Jamaican nor British, separated from both and yet caught in a space in-between leading to immense complexity.

predominantly white-dominated locality, purchasing the property from an Irishman, who it is revealed, sold to spite his neighbours. Like blacks and Asians, the Irish too were victims of racial discrimination and were subject to oppression by the indigenous white society. Nico and Munchie's lives as first-generation migrants begin at this location and marks the beginning of a new phase in their lives. The crossing of borders by the couple, from Jamaica to Birmingham and different locations within the city, can be conceived to be a shifting of positions within the 'liminal' spectrum – from a 'separation' phase to that of 'transition'.

Apart from the generalised evocation of the streets of Birmingham, we find the mention of Bull Ring, a landmark attraction of the city, when Munchie disappointedly writes to her mother: "Them have a place call the Bull Ring but me don't see no bull yet". (p13) We are also informed that the couple get married in the Birmingham Register Office, since being heavily pregnant Munchie is not in favour of a church wedding. (p17) Even in case of her job, we come across a reference to St Chad's Hospital in Birmingham, a NHS-run organisation located in the Smethwick region of the city. Thus we witness crucial episodes in the life of the couple firmly rooted to important locations within the city of Birmingham while they grapple with their life in Britain. We find once again an exemplification of the altered trend in black British writing where there is a move away from the focus on marginalisation (by the 'first wave' writers) to the delineation of everyday issues in personal and contemporary life, such as, job, marriage etc. Though not new *per se*, the issues are represented in a new light through fiction.

In Bhanot's story, 'One Last Time', the venue of the wedding is located in Birmingham, confirmed by references to the 'Rex Centre' in the Small Heath area of the city and 'Coventry Road', a major arterial route joining the two multicultural cities of the Midlands - Birmingham and Coventry. The event taking place at a major venue in the heart of the immigrant quarters indicates the importance of the occasion within the community as well as Meghna's life. Moreover, the venue as a large exhibition centre is akin to Meghna's own predicament. Lurking behind the exterior of glamour, independence and professional prowess is an overwhelming sense of emptiness and hollowness as a consequence of Sunil's betrayal and a broken relationship. The location of the venue at Coventry Road too is crucial. This major link road provides a literal and metaphorical link to Meghna's happiness that can only be restored by journeying through it for one last time. The speculation, anxiety and apprehension clouding her mind at the prospect of attending the wedding is characteristic of the ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning evident in an individual occupying a 'liminal' position. The uncertainty of her future and her relationship with Sunil positions her in a 'transitional' phase where she is trying to make sense of her particular situation. Liminality thus is a simultaneously enabling and disabling condition. The anxiety resulting from this condition is balanced by the freedom that it affords. The dialectics of opposition characterises the peculiar unity of 'liminality' and makes it a broader and nuanced concept than Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity'.

The 'street' may also be perceived to be a metaphor of the 'public' sphere, when a woman ventures into the male dominated domain of work

outside the privacy and security of the 'private' sphere of her home. Such a reading may be applied to Amina Shelley's short story 'A Bowl Full of Silence' where the protagonist within a Bangladeshi family ventures into the 'public' sphere to escape oppression at home. Shelley, a young writer born in Sylhet in Bangladesh and based in Birmingham exhibits a new stance in black British writing by narrativising the story of a young Bangladeshi girl Shefa, struggling to survive in an oppressive community where it is wrong for the woman to have a 'voice'. In the story, men in both the 'private' and 'public' spheres, in the form of her father, husband, brothers and employer possess all the power and control. Such paternalistic constraints echo the circumscribed lives of many women in the Bangladeshi community of Birmingham and women at large in multi-ethnic communities in contemporary Britain. What Shelley is essaying in this story is to fictionalise the predicament of these women in the 1970s.

The location of Birmingham features strongly in this short story as it is closely linked to Shefa's life and is representative of both spheres in her imagination. We find several references to the city in the story but it is the mention of certain specific locations and 'streets' that are indicative of the subjugation she encounters in the 'public' sphere of work. At the outset of the story, we learn about her encounters in this 'sphere' through the mention of her sauntering through Handsworth Park after being made redundant from employment "selling fabric for saris and salwar kameez". (p86) Prior to that, we learn about her job in a factory located in "Smethwick about five miles from (her) home, the border of Handsworth and Perry Barr." (p92) The importance of these locations are two-fold – one is the social commentary on

the marginalisation imposed on immigrant women but the second, more important function is to highlight the domination received by Shefa in the domain of work. References to Handsworth and Smethwick recur in many stories in the anthology as these areas are locations in the immigrant quarters of Birmingham where severe lack of accommodation compelled immigrants to live in 'ghettos' near the factories in the 1960s and 70s. As previously observed in Clarke's story, it was difficult to find alternative accommodation in other localities as the white residents were reluctant to sell to 'coloured' immigrants due the fear of infiltration into their society.

Oppression finds expression in several forms in Shefa's life. As a 'factory' worker in Smethwick, Shefa belongs to what Wilson has called "a sub-class of working class who are far worse off than the main body, consisting of sweat-shop workers and homeworkers" (Wilson, 1978). Her workplace was:

A massive warehouse with a giant table in the centre for cutting materials, surrounded with stacks of cloth. In one corner were sewing machines and a few women, ...who sat sewing, their tiffins resting by their chairs. (2001: 92)

Shelley paints the portrait of subjugation and marginalisation of these women with graphic detail. The appalling working conditions are manifested in the image of the giant table at the centre of a massive warehouse with the sewing machines packed in one corner where the cramped women workers have to carry out their work as well as eat their lunch. In this setting, Shefa spent "nine till six" working, despite being seven months pregnant. (p91) Through Shefa's story, Shelley thus fictionalises the horrific working conditions that Asian women were commonly subject to in 70s Britain.

Moving on from tackling the everyday issues of work in their writing, the new technique introduced by new generation black and Asian writers, especially women, is the use of 'colour' and 'food' as a powerful metaphors. Bhanot's narrative technique in 'One Last Time' relies heavily on vivid imagery created through the use of colour and food. From the beginning of the story we find the mention of 'cream and maroon', colours that are traditional and dominant in every aspect of an Asian wedding. Later the hub of affairs is the Centre Stage of the wedding, a canopy decorated in gorgeous "red and gold" invoking memories of the distant homeland of the imagined community of Asian guests. (p48) The protagonist herself is dressed in "midnight blue and silver silk sari" borrowed from her mother. (p46-47) The blue and silver colours contrast sharply with the glittering gold and aptly reflect the antithetical mood and disposition of the two main characters of the short story. Moreover, Bhanot writes of:

Shapely cola bottles mingle with their superior counterparts, the shapely milk bottles. Flying saucers, fat and flat, are watched critically by bubblegum eyeballs, while floating lips indiscriminately peck at scarlet strawberries. (p47)

The use of food imagery for the hyperbolic and comical rendition of a typical scenario at an Asian wedding is a reference to the altered perceptions of a new generation Briton. While respecting the older generation, it also points to the artificiality and hypocrisy underscoring social relationships within the community. Through the metaphor of food, what we really witness here is that the preoccupation with race and oppression of previous generation of writers has been supplanted by a critique of the contemporary situation in which new generation Britons find themselves. These 'Liminal Britons' are no longer nostalgic for a 'home' left behind but have a different point of view as

they consider Britain as their home. Occupying a 'liminal' position, they are able to 'stand outside and look in' to the follies and foibles of their previous generation who have struggled hard to assimilate in the British society and ended up being part of a miscellaneous culture which is ironically alien to both Asian or British culture.¹¹⁵

The nature and colour of the food are mundane and commonplace, brown cola, white milk, pale bubblegum and red strawberries, vastly different to the luxuriant colours and objects in the wedding scene, succeeding in drawing us back from the exoticism, culture and traditions associated with the older generation to contemporary Britons fashioned by globalisation and materialism. This juxtapositioning of old and modern imagery is an exemplification of the antithetical existence of the old and new generation in contemporary British society.

Food also features strongly in Shelley's 'A Bowl Full of Silence'. It is through the central metaphor of food as implied by the title of the short story that the author narrativises the oppressive life of the protagonist Shefa and her negotiation of her particular situation. Her father is the dominant patriarch who governs the household and summons get-togethers called 'family meetings' over lunch, "even though he is the only one who spoke and he decided when they'd finished". (p89) He also instructs Shefa's Amma to cook her favourite fish '*elish*' on such occasions to ostensibly dilute his dominance over the family. Amma, unlike her father however, cuts an insignificant figure

¹¹⁵ Turner contends that the ritual experience provides the possibility of standing aside from one's own social position. Moving beyond Turner's notion, I contend that 'multi-liminality' allow such individuals to stand aside from all social positions and formulate a series of alternative social arrangements, thereby facilitating their multiple existences.

in the story, relegated to the realm of the kitchen, preparing and serving food to the entire family. The key phrase with which the household is ruled is “If you have anything to say speak now or swallow it with your rice”. (p90) Shefa is also seen eating ‘rice’ on a plate after her return from work and retiring to her room with a “bowl full of silence”. Thus food is the central metaphor in the story with ‘fish’ and ‘rice’, which are the mainstay of a Bengali meal, figuring as key images signifying oppression and domination while the ‘plate’ and ‘bowl’ act as images of refuge where Shefa and her mother can drown their sorrow and disappointments.

The patriarchal domination extends to the declaration of Shefa’s marriage to his youngest nephew Aziz at the tender age of sixteen, drowning her wishes of completing GCSEs like her friends. In her household, the “words of elders were unquestionable. Especially Abba’s words” as he was the “guardian of the family” reserving the “right to decide what was right for them”. (p90) The dominance of a patriarchal figure is customary in Asian families but the interest of the story lies in how Shefa, who has been subject to a ‘bowl’ full of silence, finally manages to escape the subordination to ‘liberate’ her self.

The strong link between food and domination are reinforced in Shefa’s life through her husband and brothers’ work in the restaurant business.¹¹⁶ The saviour rescuing Shefa from her abominable predicament appears in the story in the form of Chacha –ji. Ironically a man too, Chacha-ji has been her only ally since childhood, and she has reciprocated by giving him lessons in

¹¹⁶ This is interesting in the context of Birmingham due to its popularity as the ‘Balti Capital of Britain’. Majority of the Bangladeshi population in the city are employed in the Balti restaurant business.

English. In a sense, Shelley has characterised him as Shefa's alter-ego, who is able to articulate all that Shefa lacks - the courage to voice her own feelings and opinions.

After returning from Bangladesh and reuniting with Chacha-ji as it were, Shefa visits him quite frequently. Learning about her situation, he plays his masterstroke at the end of the story. When all the family have travelled to London for Shefa's brother Shelim's wedding, Shefa finds Chacha-ji outside the reception hall. She receives the surprise of her life when he apologises to her "I am sorry I didn't do something earlier, my love" (p94) and hands her a bunch of keys in an envelope with an address written on it and places her in a cab. It is the passport to her escape from the life of oppression and silence. What is interesting is that it is a man that provides Shefa with the keys to unlock an otherwise stifled existence and cross the threshold to a step into a world of new possibilities. He helps Shefa settle into a council flat a little distance away from the reception hall where she later gives birth to her second child, the first being dead within a month of her birth. This kind of an escape from an existence marked by abjection and repression can be perceived to be a standard trope of immigrant women's writing. Parallels can be drawn with Monica Ali's protagonist Nazneen in *Brick Lane*, who finally finds solace after escaping the clutches of her domineering husband Chanu with the aid of her friend Razia and lover Karim. Chacha-ji, Karim and Razia hand a lifeline to the protagonists of the stories and relieve them from the drudgery of their existence.

The metaphor of food is brought to a full circle at the end of Shelley's story when Shefa remembers her mother's proverb: "Wherever the main

course is rice with fish, dessert is always a bowl full of silence". (p94) The implication is perhaps that although the combination of 'rice' and 'fish' makes a meal wholesome, it is symbolic of subjugation and oppression and is inevitably accompanied by an imposed voicelessness captured within a helpless bowl to complete the cycle of domination. Both women in Shefa's family are subject to this kind of suppression and silence by the patriarchs - her father, brothers and husband. The existence of both Shefa and her mother are a necessity for the functioning of the family but are dehumanised, treated as inanimate objects to be used or discarded as required. Their impersonalisation reveals their status within the family as well as in the home.

Donna Daley-Clarke's 'Saturday Soup' in the anthology *HM* uses the metaphor of food to great effect. Daley-Clarke is a British-born writer of parents hailing from the Caribbean island of Montserrat. In this, her first published short story, she recounts the way in which the eldest sister of the family takes over the mantle of the head of the household after the death of their mother, "to care for the family". (*HM*, p45) The recipe for the Saturday soup, as specified by the protagonist's mother, features as a choric oration in between the narration of events, reiterating the centrality of tradition in a time and place prone to change.

'Food' is the central theme of the story as indicated by the title, 'Saturday Soup'. In keeping with its name, the story chronicles life in a Caribbean family where there is an obsession with food and its ingredients. The 'care' of the family takes place essentially through food and relationships are conditioned by the quality and authenticity of the food. The protagonist,

whose name is not mentioned throughout the story takes charge of the family through “cooking proper food”. (p45) It is interesting to note that in this story, it is the woman who is at the helm of the family and not the male figure, and exerts her control over the family through food.

Details are provided about various ingredients and steps to be followed in preparation of the soup, with the mention of some essentials like pumpkin or the ‘green and yellow’ skinned butternut squash, without which the soup cannot be made. The vegetables with their robust and colourful exterior and hollowness inside are symbolic of the emptiness underlying the tough facade of the characters in the story. The recipe interrupts the flow of the narrative and is symptomatic of the fragmented lives of these characters with the protagonist trying her best to hold them together through the creation of the ‘authentic’ soup recalling her mother’s saying “the family that eats together stays together”. (p47)

Similar to the ingredients of the soup, the reality of the situation of the characters is contrary to what they appear. Nancy, who is portrayed as the pin-stripe suit attired professional woman working in a large multicultural city and earning a six-figure salary, is actually a victim of physical abuse and violence from her boyfriend Patrick, necessitating frequent visits to the hospital for broken limbs or joints. The contradiction between appearance and reality is also apparent in case of Patrick who is seemingly obsessed with cleanliness, body-building and eating fresh, uncontaminated food full of nutrients. However, lurking behind his unsoiled exterior is a monstrous beast who assaults Nancy on a regular basis and she has to avoid meeting her family “because she is as bruised as a three-for-a-pound mango”. (p47)

Daley-Clarke narrates that Saturdays are special for the family, the “favourite day of the week” as the protagonist is able to spend precious time with her sister Nancy. They shop for ingredients of the soup from the West Indian vegetable stall their mother used since 1957, eating “cream cheese and smoked salmon bagels and drink(ing) thick tea” on the way. (p47) In contrast to the fresh plump vegetables for the soup, the ‘withered’ and ‘lined’ appearance of the elderly stall owners, are described through the metaphor of “old spinach leaves”. (p47) We find here an evocation of migration into the Midlands in the 1950s when a large West-Indian population had settled in and around Birmingham and established communities.

The special day, Saturday, is eventful in the story not just for the regular meeting and dining of the entire family but also for the actions undertaken by the protagonist to take ‘care’ of her sister, rescuing her from the clutches of her violent boyfriend. The unnamed protagonist describes her rising suspicion of foul play with her sister and her treatment of it with food imagery– “From time to time, ugly thoughts bobbed up and down like scotch bonnet peppers” until she was firm in her resolve, when “the idea blew up like noodles in hot soup”. (p51)

To retaliate against her sister’s predicament, the protagonist prepares a ‘special’ soup for Patrick and invites him for dinner. She creates the most ‘authentic’ soup for him, “a work of art” as she describes it, decorated with “water-lily yam slices, slices of dumplings and yellow-green pumpkin pieces float like speckled frogs”. (p52) Through the protagonist, Daley-Clarke uses vivid and colourful imagery to disguise the dark poison inherent within the soup used to put an end to the misery encountered by Nancy. Here we

witness an inversion of several notions – of hospitality and gender stereotypes in particular. Patrick, the invited guest, has been served traditional food laced with poison by a female host, the matriarch of the family. This overturning of traditional notions is not only a testament to Daley-Clarke's fictional art but is exemplary of the new trend in black British writing by new generation Britons.

Paul Gilroy suggests that 'home' relates to "the location of belonging". (Gilroy: 1997) Residing within the 'liminal' spectrum, as most of the new generation black and Asian Britons do, sometimes prevents an individual from undertaking the journey back 'home' because 'home' itself becomes a shifting signifier. In case of Maeve Clarke's 'Letters a Yard', the 'home' that had been Jamaica at the start for immigrants Munchie and Nico, changed to Birmingham for a significant part of their life as the couple settled down and raised a family in the new country before the very end of the story when the couple decide to return back 'home' to Jamaica to spend the last years of their life. This existence of the protagonists and their stories in a constant state of flux is a manifestation of their 'liminal' positioning.¹¹⁷ This can also be referred to as what Mark Stein calls 'multilocation'. In this particular instance, we also envision the typical Caribbean emigres' search for 'rootedness' and a 'sense of belonging' which relates to their "historical experience of social displacement and rootlessness grounded in the slave experience and colonization". (Rassool, 1997: 197) This desire to go back 'home' is also a

¹¹⁷ Similar to what has been reiterated earlier, 'multi-liminality' allows these individuals to stand aside from a set social position and formulate a series of alternative social arrangements, thereby facilitating their multiple existences. While bearing similarity to Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' challenging the authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity, this kind of 'liminality' departs from Bhabha in its consideration of the material realm in the analysis of agency resulting from such positioning.

powerful means of disconnecting with the British culture which is viewed by first generation immigrants as fundamentally hostile.

If viewed from this perspective, Nico and Munchie are both displaced individuals and there is a significant rift between their idea of 'home'/'location of belonging' and their 'location of residence'. Repeatedly, we find Munchie making comparisons between the two locations of Jamaica and England (Birmingham). While referring to the church service in Birmingham, she mentions in a letter to her mother that "two of them service make one of ours back home" and that the priest doesn't "preach like pastor back home". (WITW, p16) Neither the garden in a traditional British home nor the food compares the same as back 'home' in her estimation. However, they try hard to hold on to their culture from their 'homeland' – "Every Sunday we black families take turn give dinner. We eat rice and peas and fried chicken. We drink punch....It make me feel like me back home." (p21) It is traditional Caribbean food that provides the link with their home back in Jamaica and temporarily mitigates their hankering for the homeland.¹¹⁸ The gulf between the two locations is also highlighted in Nico's admission – "Is one of the few ways we have to mek we feel like we back home". (p21) We even find him harbouring the intention of going back 'home' "with money in me pocket and build a house". (p17)

Unlike their parents, however, the second-generation of the Samuels family are in fact portrayed as more positive identities than their parents.

¹¹⁸ It is interesting to note that a similar association of food with the homeland can be found in Syal's novel *Anita and Me* where the protagonist's mother maintains link with her homeland through traditional Indian food. It provides her with the necessary sustenance to survive in the alien country where she finds herself situated.

These new generation Britons do not have the nostalgic hankering for the homeland and disappointment with Britain as the 'Mother Country'. They do not simply *belong*, they seem to *own* the land – they seem to be akin to the 'becoming' individuals theorised by Hall and share a similar location to the 'reassimilated' individuals within the 'liminal' spectrum. The daughter born in the UK flourishes as an artist, designing book covers for a publishing concern in London, the older son works as the manager of a business in the north of the country, the younger son is undoubtedly characterised as the most audacious and is viewed running a business selling jeans and jumpers and is on the verge of expanding into another business of managing a second-hand shop. His insolence is apparent in his retort with his father where he is explicit about his aspirations for the future –

I don't want to be like you, Dad – killing myself for a company that doesn't care whether you live or die. Always scrimping and saving. Never having anything. That's not for me. When people look at me I want them to want the clothes I wear, the car I drive and the woman at my side. In five years' time I'll have more money than you've got now. (*WITW*, p27)

Such expression of intent and ambition is a significant departure from conventional migrant literature and is instead symptomatic of the altered perception of some new generation Britons who are eager to negotiate and experience life with zest, vigour and ease in any part of the re-invented Britain. It is also an exemplification of how capitalism and capitalist enterprise has entered immigrant consciousness.

The metaphor of the 'home' is also used by Clarke to assert her feminist ideology. Traditionally the 'home' and family are viewed as the 'private' sphere, which are "part of the world to which men are expected to retreat for comfort after their forays into the "public" sphere of commerce and

paid work” according to Jenkins. (Jenkins, 2002) Historically, black women have worked in the ‘public’ spaces for white individuals while simultaneously maintaining their ‘private’ family spaces. Hence, there is a blurring of spheres as the ‘public’ is no longer a sphere reserved for work and the ‘private’ for home and leisure. In this story too, the two spheres are intermingled. We observe Munchie working in the ‘public’ sphere of the hospital/care home nursing the ailing white men as well as in the ‘private’ sphere of her ‘home’ where she is seen being a mother to her children and cooking dinners for her guests. Unlike a man, the two spheres are not distinct and she has to contend with both.

Nico’s male chauvinism and disrespect towards women is reflected in the manner in which the girl child is shunned by him both in case of Laura, their daughter left back in Jamaica, as well as their first –born in England whose name is not mentioned in the story. She is only referred to as the ‘gal pickney’ or ‘little gal’ by the parents. Nico is extremely annoyed that Munchie “cyah even do that right!” that is, give birth to a boy. (p18) Through such instances Maeve Clarke evidences the gender inequalities that are inherent in male ideology and the oppression and marginalisation that the female encounter in their ‘home’ incessantly. It is only the ‘male’ children of the household who are hailed by Nico as his “first English pickney” as it is his firm conviction that it is a boy who is capable of carrying his name forward and making him proud. To him, “Gal them nah count” because “First man them meet, them run tek him name”. (p19)

Patriarchy is portrayed throughout the story in an ambiguous light by Maeve Clarke. Nico is represented as the ‘powerful domineering patriarch’

having an authoritative role at the helm of the 'home'. The 'family' and 'home' being a part of the 'domestic sphere' is where the traditional patriarch can exhibit unrestrained power. Not only does Nico behave oppressively towards Munchie, there is a total lack of support for his daughters. The masculine assertions are also extended to towards his sons through the refusal of new opportunities for them. When an opportunity for signing a contract for a leading football team presents itself to the older son, Nico refuses to sign the papers; the justification being "Is white man conspiracy to keep us black people down". (p25) Moreover, when the younger son expresses his desire to start a new business, Nico is at once very dismissive – "Business? What business when you cyah even read or write?" (p27) Belonging to the new generation, we notice a critical perception from the writer about intricacies within relationships that were less conspicuous in writing of the previous generation. There is a censure of Nico's attitude where he is seen to simply accuse the British system for the lack of success of black individuals and not recognition of his own prejudices.

The women in Clarke's story are not simply weak and submissive characters but represented as active agents who strive to assert their existence in the face of adversity. Despite reeling under a domineering husband, Munchie's character reveals multiple dimensions. Her resilient personality manifests itself on certain occasions within the story. She maintains a secret Post Office bank account from her personal earnings which is used to send money to her daughter back in Jamaica against her husband's wishes. She also demonstrates temerity when she asserts her financial contribution to the household – "I work too, you know. Is my money

pay for the food in this house". (p21) Munchie's uncharacteristically defiant reaction to Reverend Templar's wishes not to be touched a black nurse or doctor is also evidence of her non-compliant nature and passive submission. Laura is also perceived as being bold and insubordinate as she does not hesitate to inform her father that she does not have a "daddy" or know her parents and pursues her wish of going to the US to live and work, leaving her husband and children behind. Once again, there is no hankering for the 'home' that their parents yearned for. Such evidences manifest Clarke's affirmation of black British women's difference in the new generation in comparison to that of the old.

Unlike the blurring of the 'public' and the 'private' spheres in Clarke's short story, the 'home' is representative specifically of the 'private' sphere of domesticity in Naylah Ahmed's short story 'Aqua Blue' featuring in the anthology, *HM*. From the outset, the boundaries are firmly established – 'they', 'he' and 'her'; each one's spheres clearly outlined. 'They' and 'he' belong to the outside world, the 'public' sphere, where "He is free-to (do) anything", to taunt and jibe, while her world is circumscribed by limitations as "she is she, and not he". (*HM*, p108) As a consequence, we find her seeking escape in the kitchen, customarily the heart of the home, which too appears dominated by gendered items - "from the chopping board to the sink" amidst a heap of "*he*-shaped pile of dishes, pots and colanders", reflecting the sun from the world 'outside'. (p108) The unnamed protagonist's constricted existence is thus dependent upon the reflected sunlight from 'outside', a world to which her exposure is barred by the dominant males of the family.

In this story, Ahmed uses powerful and morbid imagery of destruction to demonstrate how female confidence may be demolished steadily even within the 'private' sphere of the home, traditionally a female domain, and how an individual may be led to seek liberation by ending her own life. The protagonist is seen to be cutting onions, but in the process envisaging the outcome if the knife were to "slip and slit her translucent wrist instead of the onion". Even the rays of the sun bouncing off the utensils in the sink, the only source of her sustenance, seem antagonistic, having the capacity to "cut through her face with blades of light". (p108) The gloom and coldness of the 'home' and her feelings is starkly contrasted with the warmth of the 'outside', the 'public' sphere dominated by males, and pervaded by "warmth and intimacy", "interrupted only by clouds and tall buildings". (p109)

The kitchen is the only space in the 'home' that is represented as the female protagonist's 'own' space till it is invaded by 'they' who come from 'outside', the 'public' sphere, disrupting her order and serenity. The aggressive tones with which she is addressed despite being an elder sibling clarifies the gender hierarchy in the household – "age is a weak second to gender". (p109) The other rooms in the house are also common property, bearing witness to bitter exchanges in the form of "*they*-shaped trophies", and stipulating the limits to which she could function – "that he could do and she could not; that she *must* do, and he needn't bother". (p109) The unequal power relations in the household and within the 'private' sphere of the home are apparent through the limitations imposed on her existence in what should have been her domain according to conventional stereotypes. Such portrayal

is thus atypical of how the 'home' is depicted in women's literature and marks a departure from established trends in women's writing.

This story stands out in the anthology through its use of language. The emphasis in the use of personal pronouns- 'he', 'she', 'they' indicate that everything in the household seems dehumanised and the use of the third-person refers to the detachment in the relationship among the characters. Even the bathroom is portrayed in a negative light. It is a space bearing "the promise of an argument" as it is a common territory of necessity shared by all. (p110) Once again, Ahmed represents the space with destructive war imagery, as if the protagonist is in defence against attack from all quarters. The chemical cocktail of the cleaning agents seem to "strip her of her self-respect" leading to her resigned declaration: "Boys will be boys – and girls will be anything you want them to be". (p111) Here we find a clear reversal of the traditional norm in women's writing where the home is portrayed as a refuge for women.

The only place in the home where the protagonist can gain comfort is her prayer room decorated with a pale blue carpet. The serenity of the colour of the room is reflective of her state of mind when she prays, laying out the 'Ja Namaaz' with an enthusiasm which is otherwise non-existent in her life. Her communication with God is enabled through the matching prayer mat of 'aqua blue' despite 'their' intervention in the choice of the carpet. The "rectangular mat is the only space she inhabits where *they* are not present and cannot interrupt". (p113) It is only this safety zone, a safe haven that she treasures in the private sphere of the 'home' which she can possess as her own beyond the clutches of 'they' who torment and make her question her

own existence. To escape overt domination of the males in her family, she crosses the threshold as it were and engages in a ritual to seek refuge in religion. Like 'liminal' individuals, she is able to step into a space where 'anything may happen' and a location where she is not restricted by any normative and familial constraints. Her anxiety is balanced as it were by a sense of freedom, making 'liminality' a simultaneously enabling and disabling condition. This emphasis on freedom, renewal and regeneration reveals an expansion of the original conception of 'liminality' as proposed by Van Gennep, making 'multi-liminality' a broader and more encompassing term suitable for capturing the complexity of contemporary Britons. The politics of religiosity represented by Ahmed in this story is in opposition to the traditional model where women are seen to belong to mainline patriarchal religion and religion is conceived as 'public' sphere, a male domain. What we find instead is a manifestation of the woman attempting to reclaim religion as a private individual affair in contrast to the male dominated 'public' sphere as it is perceived in diasporic communities.

This story by Ahmed not only illustrates the protagonist's struggle to survive amidst severe adversity but also demonstrates the new generation British woman's skill in re-writing a conventional narrative of survival with the use of powerful and innovative imagery rendering the story anew.

The manifestation of 'home' is very different in Amina Shelley's 'A Bowl Full of Silence'. Being a British-born child, Shefa has her roots firmly grounded in Birmingham and conceives of the city and its location within Britain as her 'home'. Although she likes Sylhet, a "wonderful place" which was her father's birthplace, "it could never be somewhere (she) wanted to

return to at the end of every day". Birmingham was her birthplace and that is where her 'home' was. As a child she struggled to envisage how "a village on the other side of the world could ever become her home". (WITW, p90) She could only visualise daffodils in Spring rather than conjure images of "rice crops" that her father imagined adorning the fields of Bangladesh. While living in Sylhet after her wedding, she pined to get back to Birmingham, as she "she missed school. She missed her friends", eagerly counting days and months till she could get back 'home' to Birmingham/England. (p91)

Ironically, Shefa has to leave Birmingham, the city she considered her 'home', to find refuge in London, the traditional 'hub' of multicultural life in Britain. There she can retain her anonymity and escape the stifling relationships in which she has been embroiled since childhood. This brings to the fore the dichotomy between the 'centre' and 'periphery', highlighting the limitations of the peripheral region of Birmingham in stark contrast to the abundance of opportunities and chances available in the metropolitan centre of London. At the end of the story Shefa mentions, that she "misses Birmingham", her 'home' and her "Amma", the two havens she considered her own and could rely upon, but is forced to reconcile to the obscurity and anonymity provided by the large metropolis. (p91) It seems that despite attempts to restore balance between the centre and regions, the imbalance of power is still conspicuous just like the gender relations in Shefa's family.

The narrative style employed by Shelley in this story is in the form of flashback where the action shifts between the past and the present along with a shift in location from Birmingham to Sylhet in Bangladesh and then reverts to Birmingham again. This temporal and spatial movement within the

narrative imparts a dynamic quality to the story and reflects the 'state of flux' and inbetweenness that the protagonist experiences in her life along with the shifting conception of 'home' manifested in new generation Britons.

A discussion of writing by the new generation women authors from the Midlands and their expression of 'blackness' remains incomplete without consideration to their use of language. In his book, *The Language of Black Experience*, David Sutcliffe has compared language to a prism where language has the power to refract "the light of experience through many different systems of expression and embodies it in many different oral traditions Jamaican Creole and English". (Sutcliffe, 1986: 3) It is this kind of refraction of personal experiences through different forms of expression based on the oral tradition that we find exemplified in some of the writing of new generation Britons in the chosen anthologies. Although for a large part these authors use Standard English to articulate their expressions, vernaculars or regional dialects are used in certain stories to infuse the particular into a generalised dominant language.

A distinct departure and adherence to Sutcliffe's theory is the style of language used by Clarke in her story 'Letters a Yard'. It is a testimony to her assertion of identity under the cloak of 'blackness' and femininity. The narrative juxtaposes three languages – Jamaican patois, Jamaican English and Standard English, illustrating the interrelation between British and black cultures and the hybridity that is commonplace among 'black' identities in Britain. It is interesting to note that while the conversations between Nico and Munchie are articulated in the Jamaican mother tongue of patois, the children speak in Standard English and the letters from Munchie to her

mother in Jamaica are written in Jamaican English. This mix of languages, a unique stylistic feature, enables the short story to unfold in a distinctive linguistic style unfamiliar in previous black British writing.

The juxtapositioning of these three languages provides Clarke with an opportunity to straddle between two different cultures and the abruptness of the outcome highlights the relegation of black women to a 'liminal' position. In an effort to satisfy those around her, Munchie, or the archetypal black woman, puts her own identity into an invisible 'in-between space' marked by an ambiguity and inconsistency. She occupies a space of "unlocation", observing from the sidelines "the unfolding project of domination" from various groups. (Mirza, 1997: 5) It is my contention that this kind of 'liminality' is more pronounced in new generation black and Asian women located in the Midlands region of Britain as they negotiate life from multiple positions of difference.

It is also noteworthy in this story that the children of the migrant parents speak in Standard English and not their native language demonstrating a different power dynamics in their process of acculturation. The incessant switching within the story between the epistolary form and narrative in dialogue interrupts the smooth flow of the story and imparts a kind of disjointed effect which reinforces the constant state of flux and multilocality which black British identities find themselves in. Moreover, the use of the oral form of literature enables Clarke to make powerful claims about the reality of the condition of black British individuals in the peripheries of Britain.

Conclusion

It is evident from this chapter that black British writing in general and black and Asian women's writing in particular using the form of the anthology has come a long way since the post-war years. The readings of the short stories validate the 'sea-change' that has taken place in the literary landscape of devolved Britain in the last few decades, especially since the inception of the collectives in the 1980s. The whispers that had started to be voiced within the 'glass walls of the aviary' [women's' collectives], appear to have gained momentum and grown more audacious with the passage of time as evidenced in the anthologies. It is also apparent that the merit of the short stories in both anthologies are outstanding and Tindal Street Press's role in uncovering the talent of these emergent **women** writers reasserts the necessity of re-inventing Britain and giving importance to artistic expressions from the peripheries. Although political and economic conditions determine and maintain unevenness in the devolved geographies of Britain, regional artistic expressions from previously 'untapped' sources may attempt to redress the balance between the 'centre' and 'periphery' to a certain extent. The truth of the condition of black and Asian communities in Britain will remain unheard and incomplete unless the whispers can be communicated from the margins and regions of devolved black Britain.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ These anthologies of short stories have received overwhelming reception both locally and nationally. The collections generated a lot of interest from all quarters and received the Regional Arts Awards presented by the Arts Council. *'Whispers in the Walls'* has also won three awards as part of the World Book Day. It was recognised as the 'Best Book in Britain' (2003) in reflecting modern Britain, and was shortlisted alongside well-recognised and outstanding authors like Bill Bryson and Zadie Smith. Further success was achieved as the BBC bought the rights to four short stories featuring in the anthology which were later broadcast on Radio 4. Such success is remarkable for a small independent publisher focusing on regional writing. This kind of national and regional success

Chapter III - The Other Arts of the Midlands

Artistic expressions of black and Asian Midlandsers have not solely been limited to the field of writing, but have extended to a variety of other arts as well. By the other arts, I am referring to, drama, film and performing arts related projects, all of which have also been significant modes of expression for Black and Asian women from this region. This chapter will focus on such artistic endeavours that have primarily been based on and taking place in Birmingham since the 1980s. It will argue that like literature, the other arts also attempt to exhibit the diverse ways in which new generation Britons negotiate life in contemporary Britain. Although both writing and performing arts are ways of expressing the immigrant condition, it is important not to disregard the crucial role played by the latter in local, regional and national communities.

The other arts, primarily based on performances, are essentially make-believe, or, as Victor Turner famously terms it, “as if”. Richard Schechner claims that performances are “an illusion of an illusion, and as such, might be considered more ‘truthful’ and ‘real’ than ordinary experience”. (Schechner, 1988: 19) In his *Poetics*, Aristotle too contends that theatre does not so much reflect life as it essentializes it and present paradigms of it. Playing with different modes, creative practices are fundamentally illusory and experimental, standing on slippery bases and

perhaps justifies Hewison’s conception of a ‘net’ of connections restoring the balance between the centre and the periphery and asserting the important role played by the new generation black and Asian writers in contemporary Britain.

dependent on the continually shifting responses of the audience. Because of its precarious positioning, creative and artistic endeavours can be 'liminal' and dangerous, carrying actions to an extreme even for the sake of entertainment just as the 'liminal' artists that enact them.¹²⁰

The immense potential of the other arts in informing subjective experience cannot be overlooked. Live performance in particular, with its immediacy and capacity to create dialogue between artists and audiences is unsurpassable in its effect of ensuring the participation of individuals within a society. Sections of society or specific communities, not conversant with emerging literature, are also drawn to performance events creating an opportunity for them to encounter artistic productions at first hand, and engage in dialogue between the performers and themselves, the audience. Addressing issues of literacy is thus one of the key functions of the other arts along with enhancing one's sense of community. Cultural practices that are creative and artistic give rise to a range of community identities that may be: regional, metropolitan and national. Various forms of these identities can be explored using the 'liminal' space of creative practices framed by conventions of performance and art, the 'performance' enabling an exploration of the diversity of contemporary Britons.

¹²⁰While theorising 'Liminality', Turner applies the concept of 'social drama' to theatre and performance, an "aharmonic and disharmonic social process arising in conflict situations". It is defined by Turner as "an eruption from the level of surface of ongoing social life, with its interactions, transactions, reciprocities, its customs making for regular, orderly sequences of behaviour". (Turner, 1985) He contends that such drama has the potential to aid understanding and change attitudes and is conceived as being socially therapeutic, inspiring deep emotional responses and altered perception of the audience. Constructed social dramas in the form of performances, films or theatre practices thus have the capacity to draw audiences into the crafted world and engage in an exploration of their thoughts and emotions and lead to a realisation of the self.

Moreover, the other arts, performing arts in particular, also provides unique perspectives on many significant concerns such as the binaries of history and politics, citizenship and society, culture and nation, thereby highlighting the dynamic relationship between performance, history and contemporary culture. Following devolution of the British nation in 1999, national identity has become an ambivalent construction. It has complicated how identities can be configured – whether regional, metropolitan, global or diasporic, especially black and Asian diasporic identities. British national identity is not just a fixed, coherent, solitary identity but an assimilation of multiple identities that are mutually contingent and mutually embedded. This hybridised, shifting, fluid construction of identity is what I would posit as the ‘liminal’ identity of contemporary Britons. Using the anthropological concept of ‘liminality’ enables a shift away from dominant discourses of Black cultural studies and regional studies to a more encompassing concept that is simultaneously inclusive and yet undefined by limits. The state and politics of being in-between is best captured by this notion where dominant conventions are paralysed in favour of a disruption of normality; a shifting, variable and unstable predicament. Performance and other arts that may be disruptive to dominant norms and conventions can thus use ‘liminality’ of their art forms for the dynamic articulation of identities of ‘Liminal Britons’. Positioned in the Midlands, a ‘liminal’ location in itself, heightens the ‘liminality’ of the art and artists produced and residing in the region.

The chapter begins with a study of the developments in black cultural politics in the 1980s, that led to the production of films like *Handsworth Songs*, a key documentary film based on Birmingham and marking a new era

in black-British film-making. Following this is an analysis of the first British-Asian woman film-maker Gurinder Chadha's film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993). Though not entirely set in the Midlands, the characters in the film are Midlands-based 'liminal' identities similar to those described in earlier chapters. The second half of the chapter involves a discussion of the controversy involved with the stage production of *Behzti* in Birmingham's Repertory Theatre and the issues associated with the censorship of black and Asian women's artistic productions. The final section of the chapter will engage with the various arts organisations in the Midlands, whose work involves a remembering of the past and re-imagination of contemporary Britain through the work of local artists.

Black-British Film-making

'Black-British Films' may be useful as a collective term to refer to all films "which draw on the manifold experiences of, and which, for the most part are made by film-makers drawn from the Asian, African and Caribbean diaspora". (Malik, 1996: 203) The notion of black British cinema or film-making emerged as a popular phenomenon only since the 1980s and has been popularly termed as the renaissance of black British film-making. Prior to the decade, black film-making did exist but only as a highly peripheral and marginalised element of the 'mainstream' and 'independent' sectors. As Imruh Bakari suggests, it is only in the decade of the 1980s that "the politics of race and ethnicity, of diversity and difference, emerged as signifiers of the ways in which Britain had to confront its colonialist and imperialist history". (Bakari, 2000) Changes in institutional relationships and evolving politics of race in Britain necessitated a redefinition of the notions of 'Britishness' and

raised vital questions regarding ethnicity, identity and the cultural politics of difference. It also engendered a redefinition of black British cinema in the 1980s and consequently resulted in an upsurge in black British film-making, marking the emergence of a number of cinematic activists on the black British cultural scene, as we see in Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*.

As reflected in the previous chapters, blacks and Asians have had a significant impact on the culture and politics of Britain since the post-war era. However, in British cinema, films by black film-makers, such as *Sapphire* (1959), *Flame in the Streets* (1961) were marginalised and perceived to be intrusive and disruptive, destabilising the equilibrium of British society. Such perception was not uncommon as it was in keeping with the notion that black presence in Britain was a contentious issue. Relegated to the periphery, the pioneering careers of film-makers Edric Connor and Lloyd Reckord were consequently short-lived as was the career of Lionel Ngakane, who was unable to make a second film as a 'British' director. Horace Ove, known for *Art of the Needle* (1966) was a lonely exception, as he was the only film-maker of that generation to continue making films. Using narrative and documentary frameworks, these film-makers emphasized political message over the politics of representation that is inherent in the medium.¹²¹

¹²¹ Many of these films fell into the category of the "cinema of duty" described very comprehensively by Cameron Bailey: "Social issue in content, documentary realist in style, firmly responsible in intention – (these films) positions its subjects in direct relation to social crisis, and attempts to articulate 'problems' and 'solutions to problems' within a framework of centre and margin, white and non-white communities. The goal is often to tell buried or forgotten stories, to 'correct' the misrepresentations of the mainstream". (Bailey, 1992)

Significant shifts and critical differences in attitudes to the means of representation took place in the decade that followed. Acting in conjunction with changes in the material conditions of black politics in Britain in the 1980s, a new approach came to characterise black film practice, introducing diversity to black cinema. A number of developments and critical interventions facilitated such a sea-change.

As evidenced in the literary expressions of black and Asian writers, there was also a corresponding shift in the modes of representation in the cinematic field. Based on developments in black cultural politics, the shift is described by Stuart Hall as having “two discernible phases – one in the past which is now over and the new one which is beginning”. (Hall, 1988) Though both have roots in the politics of anti-racism and post-war black experience in Britain, Hall is careful in elucidating that the difference between them is significant as two different ‘moments’ can be identified. This initial moment is described by Hall as being the one when the term ‘black’ was coined to reference the common experiences of racism and marginalisation among people of different ethnic identities. The black experience in British culture thus came to be recognised as a unifying framework which positioned blacks as the invisible ‘other’ in the margins against predominantly white cultural and aesthetic discourses.¹²² Located in these spaces and locked in a kind of Otherness, black subjects had to challenge, resist and transform the dominant regimes of representation. This therefore brought to the fore, not just the problems associated with access to and methods of representation,

¹²² It is important to note that the term ‘black’ here refers to ‘coloured’ immigrants predominantly from the Caribbean islands and Indian subcontinent in the post-war era before the 1980s. It was a time when all residents of former British colonies were entitled to gain citizenship in Britain as a result of the Nationality Act of 1948.

but also highlighted the simplistic and stereotypical manner in which black experience came to be characterised.

The homogeneity of black experiences in Britain prior to the 1980s was thus necessary to be supplanted with an emphasis on complexity as questions related to cultural difference, identity and otherness were all thrown into the debate on 'black representation'. Such a move signifies a 'new phase' according to Hall, where there is a "change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself". He argues that within the realm of the discursive, the

'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutiverole. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation - subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, place in the constitution of social and political life. (Hall, 1988)

It is a move towards this sense of representation is what Hall opines characterises the transformation of the politics of representation in black culture.

The importance of Hall's assertion lies in the fact that it highlights the end of the notion of the essential black subject and looks forward to a recognition of the immense diversity and difference in the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects from various ethnic backgrounds. It also marks the erasure of the simplistic binaries in black politics such as the good 'black' subject and the essential bad 'white' subject as well as the existence of the stereotypical racist notion that "all black people are the same" in favour of a more complex way of understanding ethnicity. The outcome of this development is also the recognition that the construction of

'race' is incomplete without the complex categories of class, gender and ethnicity.¹²³

In the 'age of innocence' as Hall describes it, black British films had existed as 'minor' cinema, characterised by films made using realist aesthetic strategies in the documentary and narrative genre, of short duration and shot on video. (Hall, 1988) Despite the fact that evidence of underfunding and meagre resourcing is apparent in such work, the variety and range indicated a tremendous cultural achievement by its makers. By emphasising black rights to representation through their work, disenfranchised black film-makers acted as ventriloquists for their community and expressed protest against the structural marginalisation of the black presence in British public institutions. Political events of the early eighties coupled with the advent of Channel Four, with its remit to say 'new things in new ways', instigated black interventions in film and television and provided an arena to demonstrate a rising interest in the cultural struggles around the image of blacks in Britain.

Handsworth Songs

The increasing demand for black representation led to a prolific rise in black film-making and the emergence of new wave of black cinematic activists such as Ceddo, Sankofa, Retake Film and Video and the Black Audio Film Collective. Writing on black film-making, John Akomfrah of Black Audio outlined three aims of these highly innovative collectives:

¹²³ It was this seminal intervention in the 1980s which was instrumental in the disaggregation of the umbrella term 'black' into black and Asian, a categorisation determined by ethnicity rather than colour.

to look critically at racism in mainstream film; to assess the relevance of independent cinematic techniques for black cinema and the importance of representations which went beyond the idea of positive/negative images; and finally, to make film-making a collective practice. (Akomfrah, 1983)

In order to put these aims into practice, new generation film-makers employed an experimental approach which signified a difference from and a shift in critical attitudes to the means of representation of their predecessors, thereby denoting a 'newness' to the pre-given categories. The uniqueness of their approach has been described by Isaac Julien of the collective Sankofa :

A different perspective has emerged, a perspective that has been more critical because we've been allowed the space to think – and that is luxury for a lot of Black people, to be allowed a space to think about what we are doing, to have the time to discuss, the time to look at films and be critical about what we are looking at etc. (Pines, 1985)¹²⁴

New experimental strategies were employed as a means of intervening collective debates about the image of blacks in Britain and spread a message of urgency, immediacy and 'nowness'. The films that emerged on the scene as a result were: *Territories* (1984) directed by Isaac Julien and produced by Sankofa Film and Video; *Passion of Remembrance* (1986) co-directed by Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien and produced by Sankofa, and *Handsworth Songs* (1986) directed by John Akomfrah, produced by the Black Audio Collective. These films not only provided a challenge to the hegemony of documentary realism but also highlighted "the moral imperative which usually characterizes black films, which empowers them to speak with a sense of urgency, an urgency to make themselves heard. (Pines ,1988) As clarified by Martina Attille, this sense of urgency and burden of representation is also tied in with material constraints like the fact that

¹²⁴ These new 'spaces to think' provided by the film collectives can be envisioned as 'liminal' spaces similar to those mentioned in the earlier chapters, nurturing and promoting literary expressions of multi-ethnic women. Not simply taking place concurrently in the 1980s, these collectives too were dominated by the presence of black British women and their artistic productions were marked by a distinct female voice.

“sometimes we only get the one chance to make ourselves heard”. (Attile, 1986: 101)

Another unique feature of these collectives was the fact that majority of the artists involved with these collectives were women. Sankofa in particular included artists such as Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Martina Attile and Maureen Blackwood – all first generation immigrant Afro-Caribbean black women who featured prominently in the production and direction of the films. Speaking about *Passion of Remembrance*, a film about racism, sexism and generational conflicts and its effects on a black British family, Jose Arroyo has asserted that the film has a distinctively “female voice”.¹²⁵

The proliferation of new work and developments in black cultural and political discourses evoked conflicting responses from audiences and provoked critical debate among cultural and literary critics. John Akomfrah’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986) in particular, a documentary based on the Handsworth Riots in Birmingham in 1985, provoked severe criticism and intense debate. This is particularly interesting for the purposes of this project as it focuses on artistic production in the Midlands. Continuous with previous thematic concerns of the politics of racism, Akomfrah’s documentary film seeks to question the limitations of documentary realism and enters into a struggle with the means of representation itself. By adopting a neutral relation to the means of representation, Akomfrah searches for a ‘new’ film language which adequately articulates the complex realities of the new generation Britons’ experience of life in Britain.

¹²⁵ Jose Arroyo assigns the privileging of the female point of view in the film to the influence of Maureen Blackwood in his essay “The Films of Isaac Julien: Look Back and Talk Black” in Martin (ed) *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*.

Mercer clarifies this innovative approach by pointing out that the new films are foregrounded on an “awareness of the decisions and choices made in the selection and combination of signifying elements in sound and image” and “by intervening at the levels of the codes of narration and communication”, these films “interrupt the ideological purpose of naturalistic illusion and perform a critical function by liberating the imaginative and expressive dimension of the filmic signifier as a material reality in its own light”. (Mercer, 2003: 252) Thus what we evidence in *Handsworth Songs* is a ‘collagistic’ use of images with a ‘cut ’n’ mix style and dextrous use of sound interspersed with newsreel footages and choric intervention of a joker witnessing all with a neutral eye. Through this method, Akomfrah and the Black Audio Collective endeavour to put into practice a new visual and filmic vernacular to illustrate various elements of crises in contemporary Britain. It also reinforces the fact that the ‘truth’ about reductionist images of blackness once believed in was in reality based on easily acceptable myth.

The formally inventive *Handsworth Songs* relates directly to the events that took place in a predominantly working-class area of Birmingham in September 1985. As outlined in the previous chapters, Handsworth is located at the heart of the immigrant quarters of Birmingham, its population mostly comprised of a large black West-Indian community and an Indian Sikh community, the owners of corner shops and post offices. The inter-racial rivalry between the members of these two communities led to an outbreak which was falsely represented in the newspapers as the ‘official’ version of the Handsworth riots. *The Times*, reputed as the ‘the newspaper of record’ at the time, provided conflicting accounts of the events that took place over

three days and mainly apportioned blame to the 'drug pushers' of the West Indian community as the inciters of the violence. The outcome was that the "blacks had been demonized and the Sikh shopkeepers cast as passive, law-abiding martyrs of the mob's 'rampage'." (Southerland, 1989)

As the Handsworth Riots had engendered considerable debate among the various communities regarding the issue of blame, the Black Audio Collective found links with their project of 'different desires of the surplus underclass', and strove to provide an alternative account of the events. (John Akomfrah) Through the use of montage of images and dextrous management of dubbed music, the documentary upholds stories from different sections of the population – blacks, Asians, political signatories etc. Akomfrah intersperses the narration and images of the riots with newsreel cuts of West Indian migration into the UK in an effort to historicise memory and attempt to provide authenticity to the images. This kind of experimental approach is significantly different to previous black British films. While continuing to engage with the common issues of black politics, what we witness here is a new aesthetic approach, marking the emergence of what Judith Williamson calls the "Young, British, Black and Avante-Garde" film-makers. (Williamson, 1988: 106)

Not only the riots but the film itself provoked intense debate among audiences, critics and institutions. The debate was initiated by Salman Rushdie's criticism of the film "we don't hear Handsworth songs", alluding to the use of a dominant voice in favour of the multiplicity of voices in existence in the black dominated area of Handsworth prompted severe critical

responses.¹²⁶ (Mercer, 1988) Stuart Hall responded by maintaining his position that the film represents a struggle “to find a new language”, a quest for a new way of expressing “the Black experience as an English experience”. (Hall, 1988) In his criticism of the film Rushdie suggested that “there’s more to life in Handsworth than race riots and police brutality”, prompting Stuart Hall’s response: “his (Rushdie’s) songs are not only different but better”. In his satirical response, Hall points to the critical stance undertaken by Rushdie. In his opinion, Rushdie had based his judgement of the film on the critical criteria of a *Guardian* reviewer, an inadequate basis for political criticism as it overlooks “signs of innovation, and the constraints, under which these film-makers were operating”. Moreover, by concentrating on questions of aesthetic value of the film, Hall opines that Rushdie ignores more pressing questions related to the struggle and politics of black representation: “critical discourse about themes, about the forms of representation, the subjects of representation ... the regimes of representation”. (Hall, 1988) This Hall-Rushdie debate brings to light the lack of any viable practice in black cultural criticism, a key deficiency that had been overlooked thus far.

As a result of marginalisation and underdevelopment of black cultural production in previous years, there had not been much opportunity to theorise black aesthetics and the concentration of critical film theory on the Euro-centric canon did not allow space for professional journals like *Screen* to focus on domestic/ethnic arts. However, with the increase in black cultural production, the necessity to move beyond mere ‘celebration’ of black films

¹²⁶ Rushdie, Salman ‘Songs Doesn’t Know the Score’ in *The Guardian*, 12th January 1987, in Mercer, Kobena (ed). *ICA Documents No.7, Black Film, British Cinema*

stimulated entry into a new phase, where, as Hall describes, “we actually begin to recognize the extraordinary complexity of ethnic and cultural differences”. (Hall, 1988)

Through his review of *Handsworth Songs*, Rushdie had attempted to use his literary authority to delegitimize the film’s discourse and therefore “disqualify its right to speak”. Such polemic initiated the realisation of a lack of shared framework for black cultural production and led to black critics like Mercer seek for a more ‘adequate’ model of criticism. Mercer is in agreement with other critics that a:

viable criterion of criticism comes from the concept of ‘interruption’, which seeks not to impose a language of its own, but to enter critically into existing configurations [of discourse] to reopen the closed structures into which they have been ossified. (Mercer, 2003: 250)

Such ‘interruptions’ were necessary to reclaim a meaningful critical perspective on black British films according to these critics. This need was further reinforced at the ICA’s Black Film/British Cinema conference in London in 1988 through Judith Williamson’s intervention that ‘audiences do matter’, an approach that engaged with the politics of oppositional film-making. (Williamson, 1988: 106) The public debate between Stuart Hall and Salman Rushdie therefore acted as a precursor to the wider debate regarding the politics of independent black British film-making and its relationship with the mainstream film-making on the one hand and the audiences on the other. It also brought to light Kobena Mercer’s contention that the cinema has become “a crucial arena of cultural contestation”. (Mercer, 1994)

British-Asian Film-making

From the late 1980s, there has been a realisation that the term 'black' is really ethnoculturally 'neutral' and that it was in fact encumbered with a number of ethnic and cultural presuppositions focusing on Afro-Caribbean culture. The homogenising term 'black', though politically enabling, had proved oppressive in terms of the specific cultural productions of different ethnic communities. Many Asians found the latent ethnicity within political blackness unacceptable necessitating a disaggregation of the term. The move towards a politics of difference resulted in a re-appropriation of 'Britishness' into Black British and British Asian, the latter referring to the "complex histories of the South Asian diaspora and the settlement of those in Britain with origins in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India". (Westwood, 1995) Creation of the British-Asian was however, simultaneously enabling and disabling. While it provided Asian communities with a distinctive identity, it led to a political loss, loss of the unification of all immigrants under the umbrella term of 'black'. Similar to black film-making, there was a total absence of perspective on the independence and spectatorship of British-Asian cinema. However, in contrast to the West Indian community, Asians had a long established legacy of art and industry in cinema, albeit based primarily in South Asia. The tradition of independent film-making was in evidence since the films made by Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Guru Dutt had made their way into Britain and remained specific to the cinematic experience of the Asian people across the globe. In spite of this however, like African Caribbean/ black films, the lack of critical perspective on different

artistic choices made by film-makers was masked by the term 'black', denying any development of critical discourses on British-Asian film-making.

The Hall-Rushdie debate was instrumental in bringing to the forefront the need for theorization of the politics of representation and emphasising 'the burden of representation' itself. The debates were of immense significance to the development of a critical perspective on Black film-makers, as it provided an indication of the ways in which African Caribbean and Asian experiences are negotiated in British society. (Bakari, 2000) The key concern of how the audiences are engaged and affected by certain images leading to the construction of stereotypes was also underscored by these debates.

While the black film collectives concentrated on form and problematizing the audience's response to the images on the screen, British-Asian film-makers continued to follow the path of the drama-documentary mode attempting to redefine the dominant discourses on race. The first British-Asian film to challenge the dominant modes of representation was *A Private Enterprise* (1974)¹²⁷. Set in Birmingham, it is a portraiture of the problems faced by immigrant communities framed by warmth and humour. It narrates the story of Shiv, an immigrant Indian struggling to set up a business in Britain. "For the first time, Asian characters in the film are more than just cut-out cardboard pieces" writes Dhillon-Kashyap. "Through them, we get a sense of their experiences." (Kashyap, 1988)¹²⁸ The first feature-

¹²⁷ The film was directed by Peter K. Smith and produced by the BFI.

¹²⁸ In the film, stepping outside traditionally laid template due to his aspirations brings Shiv into confrontation with family, friends, colleagues and the local business community and compounds his struggle and isolation. Despite the bleak setting of decaying industrial

film to emerge from the workshop sector was *Mirror Mirror* (1980) by the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop. Through this film, the Midlands based collective explores the various contradictions experienced in a young Asian woman's life.¹²⁹

Perhaps the landmark film to emerge from the workshop sector was *Majdhar* (1984) by the all-Asian Retake Film and Video Collective. Formed by a group of Asians, Retake felt that "there was an urgent need to challenge the stereotyped images of black people in the media".¹³⁰ (Malik, 1996) Mirroring the sense of urgency stressed by the black film collectives, the film chronicles how the female protagonist Fauzia, being abandoned by her husband in Britain is caught 'between two cultures', undergoes a gradual change of consciousness and achieves independence. Pratibha Parmar, a member of the Bradford Black Collective, Black Women Talk and Late Start Film Collective also worked hard to "open up spaces within 'blackness' to unfix identities, avoid essentialism, foster transnational dialogue within black British feminism and, explore the boundaries of 'sisterhood'" through her films. (Ceiko, 1999) However, the late 80s saw massive cuts in the public sector expenditure under the Thatcherite regime, consequently leading to a cease in revenue funding of film and video workshops and subsequent closure of a number of these workshops and collectives.

Birmingham and Shiv's struggles, none of the characters are portrayed as victims while they negotiate the complexities of their existence.

¹²⁹ What is also evident from these films is the predominance of cultural productions by the Asian community in the Midlands region in the 1980s.

¹³⁰ *Majdhar* publicity leaflet, quoted in Sarita Malik, 1996, p203

Bhaji on the Beach

The highly acclaimed film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) directed by Gurinder Chadha and co-written by Meera Syal is unique in many ways. For the purposes of this project it is especially useful firstly because the film is made by the first British Asian woman film-maker in Britain and secondly, the characters in the film are all Midlands based – residents of Birmingham. Not only is Gurinder Chadha a new-generation Asian woman film-maker, Syal is a Midland's child and the characters in the film are predominantly British Asian women that have a Midlands connection. This provides them with characteristics of the 'Liminal Briton' that this project seeks to explore.

Developments in the television industry in Britain in the 1990s had provided a space for Black British films to be screened, especially on Channel Four. They also provided an entry-point for emerging film-makers. Crossing over from the workshop scenario which catered to a relatively selective art-house audience, some film-makers joined the 'populist' path to reach out to a larger, more heterogeneous audience. Among them the most notable was the first Asian woman film-maker Gurinder Chadha with her film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993). Ngori Onwurah's *Welcome II the Terrordome* (1994) was also a remarkable venture as the first independent feature film by a black British woman director. Unlike the previous 'Cinema of Duty' films, these films move beyond the simple focus on racial politics and instead pan across other facets of identity, making black British identity an indeterminate and complex category.

British cinema in the 1980s provided very limited opportunities for women film-makers to make their mark on the mainstream or independent scene, leading to a continuing marginalisation of 'women's cinema' or films made by women in Britain. However, the successes of films like Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992) and Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) altered the trend, heralding the emergence of a series of memorable British women's films.

Embracing the "popular, from a distinctly British perspective" as asserted by Nick Roddick, Chadha made her debut as a film-maker through an impressive array of short films. (Roddick, 1994) Produced by the BFI's New Directors' program, her film *I'm British But...* (1989) dealt with interviews of those who have been born and brought up in the United Kingdom. Representing a polyphony of voices from different locations across the British Isles, Chadha has experimented with a number of hybrid musical forms that are part of British culture. Umbi Films, her own production company was formed to showcase a number of Asian stories and produce television documentaries such as *Mind Your Language*, *The Black European* and *Acting Our Age*, the latter dealing with a group of elderly Asians making a documentary about their lives, a precursor to the treatment of transgenerational issues in *Bhaji on the Beach*.¹³¹

Funded by Channel Four Television, *Bhaji* narrates the story of a group of multi-generational Asian women from Birmingham visiting the sea-side resort of Blackpool for the day to have a "female fun time!". Using women's experiences as its central theme, the film demonstrates, as

¹³¹ The film *Bhaji on the Beach* will henceforth be referred to as *Bhaji*.

Rajgopal observes, “a feminist perspective in that gender and race are woven together to show complexities and conflicts both within and between minority communities”. (Rajgopal, 2003) Unlike previous British-Asian films, what we witness here is a marginalisation of the white world in favour of an exploration of gender and generational conflict among Asians.

In the film we come across an ensemble of Asian women, from different generational, class, and religious backgrounds, united as members of Saheli Asian Women’s group undertaking a journey to the quintessential English working-class holiday resort of Blackpool from Birmingham in the Midlands. The group is led by a passionate feminist community worker Simi, seen adorning a leather jacket worn over an Asian salwar suit. At the very outset of the journey, Simi explains the rationale behind the trip. Speaking from an overt feminist perspective she states that “it is not often that we women get away from the patriarchal demands made in our daily lives, struggling between the double yoke of racism and sexism!” (*Bhaji*, 1993) Echoing the language of a professional feminist activist, she disavows patriarchy and reinforces that the trip offers the women with an opportunity to escape a servile existence and enjoy a sense of freedom and liberty for a day. Through this statement at the very beginning of the trip, Chadha makes us aware of the filmic intention of *Bhaji* – to expose the patriarchal mindset and the parochial hypocrisies of the community.

The women participating in the trip are mainly from three generations – the elderly ‘aunties’ as they are popularly called, representing an orthodox traditional mentality; a middle-aged woman visiting from India, instilling nostalgia for an idealistic India in the minds of the older generation but

representing modern India in reality; and a group of young women in their teens and early twenties representing new generation Britons, ready to challenge the beliefs of their elders. Members of this eclectic mix of the multi-generational women are portrayed as Gil suggests, as “complex, shifting, dialogic and communal subjects” in the film. (Gil, 2001)

It is evident from the start that the film’s main theme is to point to how the lives of migrants and British-born women are variously negotiated within and outside their community in 1990s Britain. Chadha herself is careful in asserting that the film is not about any kind of ‘Indianness’ but about a variety of lives – of multi-generational women of Asian background in Britain:

we’ve tried very hard to transcend the Indianness in it, all the way through. Though these are Indian women, they are out of their community, and no one can say, oh, this is what’s going on in the community at the time. You have to say, this is what’s going on in Britain, and that’s been a very careful construction, to take them out of that community, and put them in Blackpool. You end up with feelings and issues and dilemmas, and desires and decisions [,] which has less to do with their ‘Indianness’, but to do with them as Indian women living in Britain. (Chua,1994)

The focus therefore is on British-Asian women negotiating life in contemporary Britain rather than their Asian background.

The site of departure for the trip is Birmingham, arguably Britain’s second city, steeped in significant black political history. Not only does it provide incredible memories of black migration into the Midlands but as recounted in the *Handsworth Songs*, it has borne witness to, in Mercer’s words, the “civil-disobedience that erupted as a reaction to the repressive policing of black communities in London and Birmingham in 1985”. (Mercer, 1988) The cast of multi-generational women are all seemingly united by their British-Asianness and residence in Birmingham which houses the refuge

centre, Saheli Women's Centre, providing support, advice and guidance to the community. Chadha and Syal, the scriptwriters of *Bhaji*, have created this fictional centre as the focus for the welfare of women and management of women's issues, seeking to challenge "male structures and dominance both in our own communities and in the wider society".¹³²

The aesthetics of the film reflects a kind of hybrid nature which can be visible in every facet of the film. There is no single definitive category, but a curious admixture. In keeping with dominant culture, Blackpool's golden mile, its promenade, tower pier, souvenir shops and pleasure beach are portrayed as objects of fantasy and nostalgia by British Asians. The sparkling bright light of the sea-side resort are reminiscent of the glitz and glitter of Bollywood and marks a confluence of both influences. The 'Englishness' of Blackpool is juxtaposed with the 'Indianness' of the female characters both visually and culturally, demonstrating a tension or complexity that characterises British Asian subjects, especially new generation Britons. The theme song in the film too signals plurality: Cliff Richard's hit song 'Summer Holiday' is sung in Punjabi by Asian singers to a Bhangra beat. Bhangra is in essence a hybrid music which is simultaneously "playful and subversive, both familiar and new". (Ceiko, 1999) Such treatment of music is indicative of the duality in existence in the film. Chadha herself describes this conflict as a 'British-Asianness' that informs the creative process of the film:

In *Bhaji* what I found emergingis the pull between a very British film on the one hand and being quite Indian on the other and that pull is present in every single scene , every single character, every single frame of the film....

¹³² Information obtained from an unauthored document on the Brent Asian Women's Refuge Centre referred to in "Black Women Organizing Autonomously" in *Feminist Review* 17, Autumn 1984, p99

We as Black people live with this duality – this pull – every day of our lives but it's also the force that feeds me as a film-maker. (Chadha, 1993; Malik, 1996: 212)

This duality or 'pull' that Chadha refers to gives rise to a new form of cultural identity, which I would like to term as a 'liminal' identity, one which is between all existing categories, dynamic, constantly evolving, fluid and not reducible to any one fixed definition. It is however, characterised by a sense of peculiar unity, giving rise to agency and power, enabling the 'liminal' individual to critique oppressive regimes and resist against limitations imposed by social, political and economic factors. Blackpool in *Bhaji* becomes a 'liminal' site, where the 'liminal' attributes of the British-Asian women are explored and social tensions worked out.

The title of the film also explicates this 'liminality' in existence among the female protagonists of the film and all British Asian women by extension. Alluding to cuisine, the word 'bhaji' has dual connotation. On the one hand it alludes to an Indian dish, one that is specifically Punjabi; on the other it is transmuted to a British context and refers to a snack commonly served in Asian/Indian restaurants in the UK. The juxtaposing of the different culinary worlds of the East and the West is a reference to the curious positioning of the Asian British subject in contemporary Britain.¹³³

Bhaji presents a multiple focus through which each woman tells her personal story, thereby enabling a number of issues to be raised by both Chadha and Syal, the scriptwriters of the film. No longer portrayed as stereotypical victims of passivity and oppression, the women in the film have

¹³³ It is also interesting to note that Birmingham is Britain's Balti/Asian food capital and the word 'bhaji' may be conceived as a metaphor for the British-Asian residents of Birmingham.

immense variety. John Gabriel suggests that the film “operates as much around the differences between these women as around their similarities”. (Gabriel, 1994) Complexities are revealed at different levels. Certain commonplace assumptions about diasporic individuals are replicated only to be subverted. For example, in some places the youngsters are seen wearing ‘westernised’ clothes and accessorizing with a few ethnic touches while the older generation retain their traditional ‘Indian’ garb. This is not consistent however, and such simplistic categorisations are challenged in the film. Hence the ‘non-migrant’ woman Rekha, arrived straight from Bombay, is seen wearing a fake Chanel suit demonstrating obvious signs of westernisation. It is also a signifier of the fact that residents of large cities in contemporary India today are far more broad-minded and tolerant in their outlook than the parochialism of those who have emigrated and clutching on to their old traditions. As noted by Ceiko, “Ethnicity or cultural identity is worn as a uniform or individualised in a more diluted or disguised, manner” by the characters in this film. (Ceiko, 1999) In the younger characters however, ethnicity is translated as it were, renouncing the “dream or ambition of rediscovering any kind of ‘lost’ cultural purity, or ethnic absolutism”. (Hall, 1992: 308)

The generational divide between the ‘Aunties’ with their conservative mentalities and traditional clothes on the one side and younger members of the group with their desire to assimilate and negotiate tension on the other, reveals a massive gulf, almost similar to the chasm separating these Asian women from traditional British women. Members of the group also reflect different registers of immigrant speech – the elderly ladies, visitor from

Bombay and the younger characters all having distinctive speech indicative of their respective generations. The generational conflict plays a major role in Chadha's film and brings to light the divided loyalties of women who have immigrated to Britain, desperately attempting to clutch on to the culture, traditions and beliefs of their homeland against those who are British-born.¹³⁴ As Rajgopal suggests, this is emblematic of a new generation, "the Second generation South Asians, whose loyalties are less to the motherland and more toward creating a new hybridized identity". (Rajgopal, 2003)

As second generation Asians, the characters of Hashida and Ginder are key constructions in the film. Both experience a kind of duality and 'pull' and illustrate the 'liminality' of their respective existence. Hashida is torn between her loyalties to her Afro – Caribbean boyfriend Oliver, with whom she has become pregnant, and her parents, who harbour expectations of her joining medical school and emerging as the 'first doctor in the family'. Fulfilment of their dreams is as much her responsibility as is her commitment towards her boyfriend. She is perceived as the vehicle through which her parents can escape existence as a working class family and climb the social ladder to assimilate with the British way of life. Her character also brings to light the reality of the ethnic difference between blacks and Asians – the varying perceptions of each other by the respective communities.

Compounding the complexity of Hashida's situation, some members of the older generation in the group are quick to pass judgment on her predicament and envisage her as a prostitute. Through her portrayal, a

¹³⁴ In a letter to Ruvani Ranasinha, Syal, the co-scriptwriter of this film, refers to the "usual immigrant bubble where Indians abroad are more traditional than their counterparts at 'home', over anxious to preserve what they remember as the homeland". (Ranasinha, 2007)

young woman embarking on a medical career, the movie reflects the complexity of British Asian existence. Although some women, especially new generation women, harbour desires of having a good education and a career outside the domestic domain, women of the older generation consider it unthinkable. Fears of impurity and contamination cloud their minds and fill them with apprehension. The young woman's body thus becomes the site for contending ideologies. In a study carried out among the Pakistani community of Britain, Allison Shaw explains the reasons behind the lack of education among women from this community, reasons that can be applied to most Asian women by extension. Shaw mentions common fears that "young women at college will be led astray into liaisons with boys that will jeopardize their marriages". (Shaw, 1988) Hashida's unplanned pregnancy through such a liaison confirms the older women's fears and disappointments with 'new' generation women who have high aspirations and refuse to abide by traditional customs and beliefs.

The complexity of Hashida's situation is further augmented by the fact that the unborn child's father is not part of the Asian community; he is black. The custom of arranged marriages in Asian families is a way of ensuring that the 'purity' of the community is maintained. It is also a commonplace belief that the responsibility of raising the future generation lies with the Asian woman. Hashida's impudent and intransigent gesture of having a child 'outside' the community with her West Indian boyfriend reveals one of the contradictions faced by the new generation Britons in contemporary British society. In the eyes of her community, while moving beyond her cultural roots to have a professional career is still acceptable, moving beyond her

community outside wedlock to have a baby is not. Ali Rattansi has commented on the contradiction encountered by the British-Asian woman in today's society:

the ambivalence around the figure of the British-Asian woman, at once the guardian and pillar of the 'tightly-knit' Asian family- much admired, especially for the right, for its 'family-values' and discipline - but also as a symbol of Asian 'backwardness'. She is seen as subject to extraordinary subordination and by her adherence to Asian conventions is regarded as an obstacle to the assimilation of Asians into British culture and 'English way of life'. (Rattansi, 1994)

Hashida who had been lauded and much admired for being a 'model' of 'family values' and discipline through academic achievement is suddenly transformed into an object of derision once her relationship and pregnancy are exposed. She is denounced for such a shameful act, betraying Asian honour codes. Sexual relationships, which are traditionally admissible only after marriage, have been violated through premarital sex by Hashida. Such traditional views of marriage and sex amounting to Asian 'backwardness' is something that the younger women find hard to adhere to as they struggle to find a place in British society, causing immense contradiction in their lives.

As a representative of the older generation, Asha, whose traditional Indian values have received a jolt by such an act, fantasises about a wedding scene which portrays Hashida as a prostitute and temptress. Pushpa, a spirited elderly 'aunty', voices similar sentiments by calling Hashida a 'whore' and comments in one of the scenes that "this country has cost us our children". (*Bhaji*, 1993) Blame is apportioned to the new culture which Hashida seems to have embraced in her efforts to assimilate. Roscoe argues that by raising these issues, Chadha "weaves together gender, sexuality, age, race to show complexities and conflicts both within and

between communities” in contemporary Britain. (Roscoe, 2000) A similar stigma of a so-called “race traitor” may also be witnessed in the character of Meena in Mira Nair’s US-based film *Mississippi Masala*, where the protagonist is an Indian immigrant to USA and gets sexually involved and falls in love with a series of black men. Both Chadha and Nair endeavour to highlight the inter-cultural and intra-cultural differences in the perceptions of black and Asian communities and justify the disaggregation of the all-encompassing term ‘black’.

Rejection from her own community forces Hashida to search for a new identity and establish her position as a ‘woman’. Expressing her frustration with her Asian aunties, she spills coffee on the lap of Pushpa in a cafe and exclaims “Fuck off!” as retaliation to the subordination placed by her own ethnic community. Reacting against the pressures of a racist white British society, she flings the coffeepot across the floor hurling abuse at the owner of the shop and dashes out of the cafe. She is ‘between and betwixt’ the categories of being Asian and British, ‘stalled in in-betweenness’ with its plethora of associations such as ambiguity and transgression. Realising her ‘liminal’ positioning prompts Simi, the leader of the group to explain to Oliver, Hashida’s boyfriend: “You will have to be everything to her, family, community” and help Hashida establish her own position within British society as a British-Asian subject.¹³⁵ (*Bhaji*, 1993)

¹³⁵ An interesting parallel may be drawn with Randhawa’s *A Wicked Old Woman*, where, in the absence of a husband, Ammi has to rely on her friends, family and community for support; in Hashida’s case, in the absence of her family and community, it is up to her boyfriend to provide support.

The complexity of inter-racial and inter-cultural relations is also highlighted through the character of Oliver, Hashida's boyfriend. When he learns about her pregnancy, he is placed in a dilemma as to how to react. While on the one hand he is coaxed by his black male friend to believe that being 'not white' does not equate with being black and it is all a 'confusion', on the other, he is advised by his West Indian father that if he marries Hashida, he will be marrying into her family, from which he has been kept secret so far. Through the episode Chadha seems to indicate that occupying positions of racial otherness and being immigrants, does not necessarily evoke compatibility. By depicting such instances, the film attempts to expose the boundaries between the divisiveness that exists within 'black' British culture, especially that between Afro-Caribbean and Asian cultures.¹³⁶ Following the arguments put forward by Kobena Mercer in his influential essay 'Diaspora Culture and Dialogic Imagination', it may be said that *Bhaji* espouses a "syncretic" dynamic that critically appropriates codes of the dominant culture and 'creolises' them, in articulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning otherwise". The film not only borrows from but also inverts and destabilises dominant conventions. (Mercer , 2003: 250)

The character of Ginder also experiences a tension similar to Hashida – a pull 'betwixt and between' maintaining her image of being a 'good' wife and escaping the stranglehold of a violent husband who regularly subjects her to physical abuse. She is in a dichotomy due to the repressive pressures of the community enticing her to return to her marital home and husband on

¹³⁶ It also validates the disaggregation of the term 'black' into black British and British Asian.

the one hand, and her own investments in an alternative notion of love, marriage and family on the other.

Through the construction of Ginder, the film demonstrates that domestic violence is “an overt form of subordination for Asian women, but the family is not the only site of oppression”. (Trivedi, 1984) Oppression need not only confront Asian women in the form of white men or a white racist society. Instead women can feel and be oppressed by the position and status they hold within their own home and community where they are easily relegated to the subordinate position of a wife and mother. Ironically, the male dominated system is whole-heartedly supported and preserved by the elder female members of the community. Nancy Chodorow discusses the psychology behind such servile behaviour in her article “The Psychodynamics of the Family”:

Women’s mothering also reproduces the family as it is constituted in male-dominant society. [...] Women in their domestic role reproduce men and children physically, psychologically, and emotionally. Women in their domestic role as homeworkers reconstitute themselves physically on a daily basis and reproduce themselves as mothers, emotionally and psychologically, in the next generation. They thus contribute to the perpetuation of their own social roles and position in the hierarchy of gender. (Chodorow, 1993)

In Chodorow’s contention, women are therefore active participants in the perpetuation of their subordinate status. In the film, the ‘aunties’ in the group validate this notion by making no attempts to hide their disgust at Ginder’s decision to leave her husband and taking shelter in an Asian women’s hostel along with her son Amrik. In fact, they ostracise her for having left home and persuade her to return to her marital family. Their collective response is the disparaging remark, “These modern girls can’t adapt, and those with jobs are worst. She must have done something!” (*Bhaji*, 1993) The myopic

perceptions of the roots of oppression are thus challenged in the course of the film.

Escaping her stifled existence for a day out in Blackpool, Ginder is eager to experience freedom from the traditionally imposed roles and enjoy the day with her son and members of the Saheli group. Unfortunately, her husband finds out about the trip and follows in pursuit of her to Blackpool in an attempt to persuade his wife to return to her servile and abused position within his family. Soliciting help from Asha, an aunty in the group, he manages to find her. The scene in the 'Manhattan' bar is crucial: providing an illustration of a potential ethnic conflict, leading to a transformation of attitude towards Ginder and revelation of the truth of the situation. A performance by a troupe of male strippers, Liberty and Sons, at the location of their final entertainment, accidentally exposes Ginder's bruised arms and alarms the spectators, especially the 'aunties' who had been so disapproving of her. Asha and the other 'elders', are forced to reconsider their views on Ginder and attempt to redress the situation by warning Ginder of her husband Ranjit's presence. Her bruised body is the signifier of the oppression that women have to endure both within their own homes and outside in their own community.

In the following climactic scene, the couple are initially seen to be having a peaceful conversation about Ginder's escapade till she clarifies her intention - she is ready to return with him but not to his family. She elucidates her choice of the individual and not the family, who have shown reluctance in

accepting her and been the major source of oppression.¹³⁷ An angry outburst “enough’s enough!” followed by physical violence confirms suspicion about his intent and nature, making Asha intervene and slap Ranjit, Ginder’s husband. Responding by lashing out at the surrounding women, it is he who becomes the object of ridicule in a public arena. Not only is he scoffed at by the women in the group, but also by his own brothers, albeit in different ways. While the elder brother chides him for having let Ginder escape again, the younger brother expresses his disgust at his brother’s violent and derogatory behaviour and breaks all ties with him, leaving him behind in Blackpool. Through this scene, Chadha challenges the dominant notions of patriarchy and demonstrates resistance by the new generation of women. By situating the scene in a public space – the streets of Blackpool, a predominantly male domain, she defies tradition and makes a significant gesture heralding change. Moreover, as Roscoe aptly points out, “the film manages to undermine male authority, in particular that of the Indian husband as head of the traditional extended family”. (Roscoe, 2000) The subversion of male authority enables the women to be empowered in the public domain instead of being relegated to the domestic sphere. Thus traditional notions of Indian femininity propagated by some Bollywood movies are destabilised in this film in favour of a contested nature of Indian femininity.

¹³⁷ Here we witness the protagonist displaying characteristics that are beyond ‘hybridity’ and more akin to ‘liminality’. The agency manifest in Ginder’s disavowal of her husband and his family’s oppression is an aspect neglected by Bhabha’s conception of ‘hybridity’, whose notion of agency is only restricted to semiotic transactions disregarding any historical or material ones. In this instance, we find Ginder resisting against the limitations imposed by social factors, empowered by her ‘liminality’.

The film attempts to demonstrate how women from different generations grapple and negotiate identity in different ways. Through the character of Asha, an elderly aunty in the group, Chadha very dextrously uses the Bollywood aesthetic in the sequence of her fleeting romance with the quintessential white British gentleman, only to subvert it. Through the episode, Chadha intends to indicate that the divide between the generations are not enormous: the older women that are ostensibly very traditional and orthodox are in reality quite the opposite. It is inherent within any individual to seek liberation from an oppressive existence and Asha's fantasies provide her with such an opportunity. The younger generation women are not seen to aspire towards an idealistic notion of femininity but are focused on negotiating the differences existing within a British Asian identity. As pointed out by Bhattacharrya *et al*, the film "explores the specifically British experience of these Asian women, and the factors which mesh them to this setting" (Gabriel & Bhattacharrya, 1994) and therefore demonstrates not their attempts at being Western or Asian but being both.¹³⁸ I would like to suggest that this enables these women to occupy a 'liminal' space and emerge as a 'liminal' Briton. The constraints of traditional versions of Indian femininity, family values and traditions are abandoned in favour of a move towards a new subjectivity and what it means to be British.

This kind of a representation by Chadha is in keeping with the new generation of black film activists who have challenged the concept of identity as a fixed notion. As Stuart Hall points out, identity "is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside,

¹³⁸ They are akin to Turner's conception of the 'Liminal' – "neither this, nor that and yet is both".

representation". (Hall, 1990: 222) In *Bhaji* we witness the existence of not just one but a number of differences that exist within British Asian identity, highlighting the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of the Indian community in Britain. Similar to other Asian films like Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Launderette* and *Young Soul Rebels*, *Bhaji* does not provide a monolithic or unitary representation of the Indian experience in Britain. What we find instead is the expression and existence of diversity within diasporic identities, thereby challenging the position of the 'Other' which the Western world has traditionally allocated to the non-Western communities. Parminder Bhachu notes that British Asian women are finding "newer cultural forms that derive from their ethnic traditions and that are constantly formulated in the context of their class and local cultures", pointing to the "self-determination of Asian women as active agents who interpret and reinterpret, formulate and reformulate their identities and their cultural systems in a climate of continual change". (Bhachu, 1995) This succinctly captures the 'liminality' of these new generation women who continually shift positions within the 'liminal spectrum' to reinterpret and reformulate their identities and culture.

The film throws up extremes of polarity encountered by these new generation Britons, those experienced by Chadha in her own life as a second generation immigrant child in Britain. Conventional perceptions of Asian women are being played with through the representation of the motley group but in the process demonstrating complicated acts of resistance. In the attempt to illustrate new generational characteristics, Chadha does not ignore the inherent problematics of diasporic existence within Britain. Hence she catalogues a wide range of polarities such as: "racism in terms of black

or white, or black and Asian, or older generation and younger generation, or Indianness and Englishness and Britishness and Internationalness” all of which are explored in the film.¹³⁹ (Gabriel & Bhattacharyya, 1994) To comprehend such polarities, it is necessary to view certain situations in the film in isolation.

Racist encounters are apparent in the early stages of the film when the group have set out on their journey to Blackpool and are overtaken by minibus full of young white men who ‘moon’ them. While it shocks and scandalises the elderly members, the younger women find it amusing. The same group of British lager touts confront them when they stop at a motorway service station for a comfort break. Being an object of their gaze, the women ignore them initially. However, on their return from the toilets they are accosted directly:

Man: Laying his hand on Simi. Oy! Get rid of the saris darlin’ and we can go somewhere tonight.

Simi: Get off you sexist pig.

Man: Are you lesbians then?

Simi: Are you the alternative? (*Bhaji*, 1993)

Surprised by the angry rebuttal from Simi, the man hurls racist abuses at the women, including the stereotypical racist remark of “Go back to where you came from”. (Ibid) The women however do not submit easily and retaliate verbally. Simi is then witnessed crying out: “Right scumbags. Pricks!” followed by driving the minibus in the direction of the men in an attempt to run them over. Dejected, the men are seen left behind throwing beer cans at the bus and shouting in a futile manner. Through this episode, the film

¹³⁹ Gurinder Chadha in an interview with Gargi Bhattacharyya & John Gabriel

highlights the difference in attitude of new generation women who not only do not hesitate to resist but are ready to fight back matching the foul language and mind-set of the racist abusers. The passive acceptance of stereotypical Asian women is thus supplanted by agency in the form of vehement opposition.¹⁴⁰ It is also a reminder of the fact that discourses of gender and sexuality are intimately interwoven with the discourse of race.

The fact that the communities are fighting back can also be evidenced in the episode in the cafe. Pushpa and Bina are seen to venture into the cafe to finish off their remaining lunch. Noticing their Tupperware containers carrying leftover naan breads and samosas, the middle-aged white woman sitting on their side nods her head in disapproval and turns to the cafe owner for support. Oblivious of the irritation of their audience, Pushpa and Bina continue to enjoy their food till Hashida walks in, prompting Pushpa to comment "This country has cost us children". Outraged, the cafe owner sternly informs the ladies: "Excuse me, but if it's take-aways you want, then the Khyber Pass is round the corner. It's strictly *English* food in here". (*Bhaji*, 1993) As the women continue to eat, the cafe owner persists with her racist remarks:

Cafe Owner: Bloody heathens. No manners. They should go back to where they came from.

Pushpa: We should never have come to this country.

Cafe Owner: They breed like rabbits. (Ibid)

¹⁴⁰ Once again we witness the women enabled and empowered by their 'liminality', critiquing and challenging oppressive regimes, traits that would have been obscured had they been envisioned as simply 'hybrid' characters marked by an in-betweenness. It is my contention that 'Liminality' thus imparts a heterogeneity that 'hybridity' cannot.

The angry exchange is followed by Hashida's angry rebuttal of both parties with the shouting out of "Fuck you!" The cafe owner's comment about the food is ironic. In multicultural Britain, Indian food is as popular as the English fish and chips and it is a fact that "the 'curry' has been appropriated into British cuisine and culture". (Narayan, 1997) In such a milieu, the cafe owner's reaction is blatantly racist. Writing about this episode, Roscoe comments that the cafe owner is not really making a statement about the otherness of Indian food; "rather they are made to position the Indian women as 'Other' to the English". (Roscoe, 2000) This is further reinforced in the comment about returning home. Although Pushpa and Bina have immigrated into Britain several years back, for Hashida, Britain *is* her home where she has been born and brought up. In essence, what the cafe owner indicates is that she desires a reversion back to the colonial image, something diametrically opposed to contemporary multi-ethnic British society and what Chadha espouses in her film. Through this episode not only do we witness the characters challenging racist encounters but also a challenge and resistance through artistic form.

This new mood of assertiveness among South Asian communities, especially in women, is a consequence of the new cultural politics that has emerged in post-1980s Britain. In an analysis of British Asians, Tariq Modood has described this new politics as a:

Politics of projecting identities in order to challenge existing power relations; of seeking not just toleration for ethnic difference but also public acknowledgement, resources and representation ... In Britain there has emerged an 'Asian' identity based on a hybridic Asianness, rather than, or in addition to, a regional, national, caste or religious identity derived from one's parents, and sometimes directly modeled on forms of black pride and black hip hop or rap music. (Modood, 2001)

Gurinder Chadha's film *Bhaji* explores this kind of identity formation of new generation Asian women residing in contemporary Britain.

The film *Bhaji* can also be said to be groundbreaking as it tackles issues affecting the daily lives of Asian women which have remained untouched by mainstream British cinema thus far. Issues such as "arranged marriages, miscegenation, restrictions on female sexuality" are 'real' concerns that many South-Asian women have to grapple with in their everyday lives and have not been dealt with by the previous generation of film-makers. The uniqueness of the film lies in the fact that all stereotypes are disrupted at the end with all polarities and binaries muddled up. Ultimately, the fact that women characters are victims of racism and male domination triumphs over the message of generational conflict that appeared domineering. In addition, the film has an undeniably British feel to it prompting Stuart Hall's comment in *Sight and Sound* that it is a "world where Carry on up the Khyber meets Cliff Richard" and therefore making it a British-Asian film in every sense. (Hall, 1994)

Viewing from a feminist perspective, the British-Asianness of the film makes it fall into a category of its own as theorised by the postcolonial film theorist Ella Shohat, comprising both an 'inside' and 'outside' status. While Chadha's location as a diasporic subject enables her to provide a critique of the community from within, granting the film an 'inside' status; the film possesses an 'outside' status by dealing with issues faced by the minority communities and discourses related to those labelled as 'outsiders' by the nation-state and hence excluded from mainstream discourses. This kind of

heterogeneity is the hallmark of the artistic productions of new generation Britons and Chadha's film is a testament to the fact.

Performing Arts Scene in Britain

Moving on from cinema into the realm of performing arts, contemporary British culture has been strongly moulded by both black and Asian influences in different but highly articulated ways and the Midlands has been a major centre of such activity. Following similar trend as films, Black theatre and related art practices developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Britain. The 1980s was a "riotous decade" declares Beatrix Campbell, a decade that has been witness to strong community resistance in the form of riots and insurrections. (Campbell, 1993) In the aftermath of the uprisings in Brixton, Notting Hill and Handsworth/Birmingham and the British government's adoption of liberal policies of multiculturalism, certain public institutions such as the Greater London Council had responded with redistribution of funds to different artistic and literary productions. This provided new opportunities for Black arts practitioners to engender a cultural renaissance of black creativity. It also coincided with the second-generation black and Asians affirming their rights to British citizenship. (Mercer, 1994)

The 1980s also signalled the "the explosion of new women's theatre" notes playwright David Edgar. (Edgar, 1999: 8) Endorsing his views, theatre critic Benedict Nightingale, cites women's drama as the "most positive aspect" of the 80s, which was otherwise a "barren decade for new drama". (Nightingale, 1989: 17) Coupled with this upsurge and resistance from black theatre practitioners led to a steady increase in the number of black and

Asian women playwrights in Britain. Prior to that, most playwrights were male by virtue of the fact that female migration into Britain was preceded by men and female access to public cultural spaces was not limited.

The emergence and publication of work by black and Asian women playwrights in Britain also coincided with establishment of Postcolonial theatre/theory, intercultural theatre, world theatre, and the development of performance studies as academic disciplines. However, the label, “black woman playwright” has been highly problematic from inception. As Winsome Pinnock, a black British playwright complains:

When I started writing I was constantly being asked whether I considered myself a black playwright, a woman playwright, a black woman playwright or just a playwright – as though I could choose different identities! . (Pinnock, 1999)

Writing in the early 1970s, it was necessary for the playwrights to make a choice between race and gender – whether they would consider being part of a black company or a women’s company, as both were mutually exclusive. In response therefore, some black women practitioners started their own groups and companies, such as Theatre of Black Women (1982) and Iamni Faith (1982). Simultaneously, certain well-established women’s companies, particularly The Women’s Theatre Group, recognised the need to alter their all-white membership. Realising the need for change, the Birmingham-based group Women and Theatre, also proceeded towards a multi-ethnic composition in keeping with the demography of the region.

The liberality of the Greater London Council and the accessibility of funds through the implementation of multicultural policies enabled the founding of theatre organisations such as Talawa in 1985 and Tamasha in

1989. While Talawa was established by Yvonne Brewster representing the black theatre community, Tamasha came into existence with the help of Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Buchar and was financed substantially by Asian businessmen. Continued financial support from the Arts Council of Great Britain offered funding for a number of productions resulting in the emergence of new playwrights, a significant rise in the number of black audience, the establishment of playhouses such as Cochrane Theatre as the London home for 'Black' Theatre and the endorsement of playhouses such as The Theatre Royal at Stratford and the Royal Court Theatre. With the passage of time and changing circumstances, policies of these theatre organisations underwent change. Talawa had initially concentrated on work by established women playwrights, but none were British-born. The Black Women's Writers Project was set up to encourage new black British women playwrights. Subsequent productions by Talawa thus featured work by these new playwrights and focused on topics that were close to black British consciousness.

From its very outset, Tamasha's reputation rested on its aim to cater to "culturally diverse and middle-scale audiences" but unlike Talawa, its focus has been on new writing projects that have developed as a result of their collaboration with the Royal Court Theatre, support from the London Arts Board and the Peggy Ramsay Foundation. (Tamasha) Despite their aim of supporting "emerging British artists" and being a Black British marginal group, it has been Tamasha Theatre Company's intention to support and target artists from an Asian background. In fact, it is stated in their mission that they aim to "bring contemporary work of Asian influence to the British

stage". (Ibid) Thus its productions primarily deal with lives of Asians who are either migrant or second and third generation British subjects residing in contemporary Britain. Although, the company began by telling stories about the private lives of British-Asians, it gradually progressed on to relating tales about the public roles undertaken by Asians.¹⁴¹ The popularity of Tamasha also lies in its efforts to develop "intracultural theatre education", a project launched by organising five school teachers from Birmingham and London to take part in the TIME (Tamasha Intracultural Millennium Education) programme¹⁴².

Disaggregation of the term 'black' in the 1980s and the foregrounding of diversity as key to contemporary Britain is evident from the different artistic aspirations of the two key theatre organisations mentioned above. The re-appropriation of the term 'black' led to the recognition that British culture has been differentially shaped by black and Asian influences and the plays written by women playwrights express the very diverse needs and issues of different ethnic communities. The issues of arranged marriage and single motherhood, for example, have different importance in either community. While the former does not have much bearing on Caribbean communities, single motherhood does not affect the Asian community in the same way as it affects the Caribbean community.

Moreover, varied influences had affected British culture in the 1980s and 1990s from each community. While popular music and dance scenes of

¹⁴¹ Sudha Buchar & Shaheen Khan's *Balti Kings* staged in Birmingham Repertory Theatre in December 1999, provided a portrait of Birmingham's much acclaimed Balti restaurant owners and its workers who have helped make the 'Balti' a British institution.

¹⁴² The Central School of Speech and Drama co-hosted the International TIME conference in 2001 as a result of Tamasha's project.

the 80s and 90s Britain were the result of various black cultural influences mainly from the Caribbean and black American backgrounds, the 90s and the turn of the century witnessed the increasing visibility of Asian cultures in Britain through Bollywood musicals, Asian melas etc. As Griffin observes,

The cultural identity that diverse Asian communities have carved out for themselves in Britain during the 1990s is both prominent and distinct from Black British cultural identities and operates across somewhat different cultural terrains. (Griffin, 2003: 11)

Griffin points to the distinct identities and cultures of blacks and Asians, their differing ethnicities necessitating the splintering of the umbrella term 'black'. Britain of the twenty-first century has thus been fashioned by both black and Asian communities in different ways. Such influences have transpired into the field of playwriting and find expression in plays by the new generation women playwrights. A number of other theatre companies have also emerged contemporaneously, such as Tara Arts, Kali Theatre Company, Clean Break, Red Ladder, and many others who provide a platform for such new work by black British and British Asian women playwrights.

In most cases, new plays were written in response to calls for submissions or commissions to write for a particular company or a specific topic. For example, Tanika Gupta responded to a call from Talawa inviting 'new black women to send in stage scripts' and Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Besharam* (Shameless) was written as part of Birmingham Rep's Attachment Scheme, which was designed to promote new playwriting and nurture young writers for theatre.

Certain common characteristics are shared by plays written by new generation playwrights. The most crucial among them is perhaps the

deliberate location of the black and Asian actress as a strong protagonist at the centre of events, an opportunity that is rare in plays by white women playwrights. Women from diverse ethnic groups are traditionally not commonly visible on the British stage and hence this new trend provides an excellent prospect for women actresses from ethnic backgrounds to be at the centre of action and for the audience to focus on people from such social groups.

Another common feature of these plays is the thematization of issues of race, ethnicity and colour in an effort to highlight the specificities of each culture. Following a similar trend to literary productions, black and Asian women playwrights almost inevitably deal with such themes in their plays as key determinants of their characters' experiences. This is almost inescapable considering the changing political climate in Britain where questions of difference, ethnicity and migrations are constantly being thrown in a melting-pot and have to be engaged with. However, many women playwrights choose to move beyond such issues. As manifest in the previous chapters, certain black and Asian women are more preoccupied with relations among women than with thematizing issues of race. In fact, some other typical thematic concerns of these playwrights have been, as Griffin notes, the specific but differential treatments of "family and community, the representation of young single mothers, of forced and arranged marriages, of inter-generational conflicts that involve multi-cultural dimensions". (Griffin, 2003: 11)

Engaging with historical and contemporary socio-political issues is also a prime concern of these new black and Asian women playwrights.

Such issues have an impact on immigrant communities in particular ways both in Britain and on their places of origin. Sometimes it necessitates a break with the community as a result of the changing values across generations and is evidenced in a number of plays such as Grace Dayley's *Rose Story* (1985), Rukhsana Ahmad's *Song for Sanctuary* (1993) and Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Behsharam* (2001). Though not initiated by voluntary action, the female characters decide to move out of their communities often as a result of psychical and physical violence. Occasionally, issues around sexual identities play a major role problematising their predicament even further. The complexity of different cultural identities is thus highlighted providing a consistently multi-dimensional view of contemporary Britain.

Cultural specificity is expressed by playwrights in a number of ways, key among them being the use of languages other than English as well as particular accents or dialects such as patois. It is commonplace to find black British playwrights from West Indian backgrounds using patois to locate their characters culturally. Speaking about her play *A Hero's Welcome*, Pinnock, for example, considers this experience highly liberating:

the first time I'd used patois ... I found that so liberating. It was another voice and it freed me in some way to be myself as a writer. It was a breakthrough for me personally ... it was like discovering my voice. (Pinnock, 1997: 50)

Similar experiences are shared by a number of other playwrights writing in different languages, especially as it enables them to escape being 'under the Western eyes'. Languages also help to foster social cohesion. Articulation of languages such as Hindi, Gujarati, patois, Creole etc. simultaneously appeals to audiences familiar with those and installs them within British culture. It provides an opportunity for these languages to find a presence in

high-cultural spaces which have traditionally been reserved for standardized forms of English. Thus, such languages instead of occupying a different cultural space, become part of British culture itself.

There are however, certain new playwrights who deviate from the norm and do not specify the cultural identity of their characters. The racial or ethnic identity is not detailed in the plays although difference in the characters is evident through their names, accents, language, gestures, costume and so on. A case in point is Trish Cooke's *Back Street Mammy* (1990) where there is a total absence of an articulation of any specific identity. By doing so, the playwright avoids setting their characters in a racialised frame and instead imparts to them a subject-status that is constitutive of the Britain depicted in the play. This departure from trend enables black women writers, "living now within the administrative centre of what was/is left of the British Empire" as Carol Boyce Davies argues,

to launch an internal/external critique that challenges simultaneously the history and meanings of imperialism, the projects of postcoloniality, the implications of various nationalistic identifications of home, and the ways in which masculinity interacts with these various systems of domination. (Davies, 1997)

These writings and plays thus bring to the fore the versatility, temerity and heterogeneity of new generation black and Asian women playwrights.

An analysis of some of the signatures borne by these new plays help to highlight the historicity of the work done by black and Asian women playwrights in Britain. The changing circumstances of these women playwrights is mirrored in their work since the 1980s and trends may be mapped. In the 80s, inter-generational conflict between the parent who *had* migrated and the child who *was* migrated or born in the new country, and

their adaptation to the new situation, seemed thematically more dominant. The 90s however, revealed that the focus had shifted to life in contemporary Britain, as part of a generation that were either British-born or had grown up in the UK. The theatre producer and critic Jatinder Verma explains: “The rise of a second-generation [*sic*] of “foreigners” – children born of immigrant parents - ... provided a powerful motive to *achieve presence*”. (Verma, 1994) However, this was more difficult for women playwrights as they struggled to achieve presence themselves within their own communities.

Regional Playhouses

Despite difficulty in achieving presence, certain theatre venues have provided opportunities for black and Asian women playwrights to stage their work in Britain. Although most have been London-centric as has been the case with literary productions, regional stages have also played their part in promoting ‘ethnic’ productions.¹⁴³ Located mostly in large multi-ethnic cities, most notably theatres such as the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, the Leicester Haymarket, the West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, the Liverpool Playhouse and the Mill Theatre in Bradford have striven to provide opportunities to women playwrights of black and Asian backgrounds to achieve presence.

The growth of the regional theatres has been facilitated by shifts in governmental policies since the post-war period. It has undergone a roller-coaster ride through the years till the advent of Labour government in the late

¹⁴³ Theatres that have been active in promoting black and Asian productions in London include: Soho theatre, Royal Court Theatre (that supported Winsome Pinnock), National Theatre (appointed Tanika Gupta as Writer-in-residence), Theatre Royal, Stratford East and many others.

1990s. The original impetus to 'organise the theatre' in response to Matthew Arnold's call in 1879 had led to the establishment of a state-funded national theatre and a series of subsidized repertory theatres across Britain. The repertory was an innovative concept that was presented as part of William Archer's proposition for a National Theatre, a model that was vastly different to the dominant practices of the time. In fact,

the repertory idea was heavily linked to the growing awareness of theatre's potential importance as an educational as well as artistic medium and, therefore, its significance in the cultural life of the country. (Turnbull, 2008: 10)

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1945 heralded the arrival of state-funding of the arts and provided the emerging regional repertory movement with the necessary impetus and resources to prosper and thrive rapidly.

The state funding of these regional theatres was however simultaneously enabling and oppressive. While on the one hand it provided massive opportunities and a stable support base to the regional theatres, it also meant that government bureaucracy was hugely influential in the amount of subsidy that was allocated and theatres were increasingly dependent upon state funding for their survival.¹⁴⁴

Reeling in vulnerability from the outset, the advent of the Conservative Party in 1979 and ascendancy of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister

¹⁴⁴ Moreover, there was no national policy regarding the distribution of funds to the regional theatres and the Art Council's emphasis on the "civilising nature of art" dictated funding for the regional theatres. The introduction of Labour Party's '*A Policy for the Arts*' in 1965, stating participation, access and community provision as the main agendas along with increased financial support from non-statutory bodies such as local authorities imparted a social emphasis on regional theatre production. Balancing pressure and demands from different bodies made it difficult for regional theatres to modify their programmes.

compounded problems. The “Conservatives’ enterprise culture and their scant regard for the arts during the 1980s and 1990s sounded the death knell for many producing houses” across Britain, especially, in the regions. (Turnbull, 2008: 10)¹⁴⁵ In 1997, when the Blairite government succeeded, there were only forty-five regional playhouses remaining that had managed to survive by staging their own shows instead of depending on touring productions. A revised agenda under New Labour saw significant rise in state funding.¹⁴⁶ With the election of the new Coalition government in 2010 and recession rife, change is anticipated as the playhouses brace themselves against the massive spending cuts envisaged to injure the arts sector in particular.

The Birmingham Repertory Theatre

Among the various regional repertory theatres that came into existence in the post-war period, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the Midlands is among Britain’s most prominent regional playhouses. Apart from the Arts Council, it is partially funded and governed by the Birmingham City Council and has borne witness to immense social and political transformation through the years. Despite priding themselves on being residents of Britain’s ‘second’ city, the Birmingham audiences have complained about the lack of artistic and cultural provision in the city. As Brian Crow notes, “until very recently arts and leisure provision in Birmingham was substandard for an

¹⁴⁵ The policies of the Conservative government were directed at the reduction of state funding of the arts and compelled the provincial playhouses to compete with open market forces and function as a commercial business. During their eighteen-year tenure in the government, the number of regional playhouses fell by a quarter as they struggled to survive.

¹⁴⁶ The creation of the first national policy for theatre in 2000 recommended substantial extra funding to the arts with £25 million allocated to provincial playhouses, albeit restricted to regional theatres in England and subject to the vagaries of central policy.

urban centre of such size and significance". (Crow, 2006: 108) The basis for such lack of provision has been the paucity of funding and precarious situation of regional playhouses and art centres through the Thatcherite years. Owing to this, theatrical provision in the city suffered most significantly. Although, the Hippodrome and Alexandra theatres cater to the demand for musicals, and the Drum to some touring black and Asian productions, there is a scarcity of good quality theatre and theatre venues in the city.

Coupled with the lack of suitable theatre venue is another serious problem for theatre in Birmingham or the Midlands - that of consumption of theatre. There is a shortage of any stable, theatre-going audience. Over the years, there have been several changes in the artistic directorship and management of the Rep, but the audience numbers have remained static leading to frequent financial crises of the theatre. In fact, the success of a number of regional theatres has been encumbered by the general decline in serious theatre-going. Referring to this specific problem in 2000, the outgoing artistic director Bill Alexander despaired that he was unable to attract large audiences to the Rep despite his utmost efforts. He also expressed his frustration at the fact that while certain productions were poorly attended by the Birmingham audience and suffered commercially, the same play received critical acclaim and large audiences at other venues outside the Midlands. (Crow, 2006: 108)

Moreover, the Rep's attempts at attracting more ethnically diverse audiences has been paltry if not negligible during the 1970s and 80s. Few productions were peppered across the two decades featuring black and

Asian artists. These included *Up Spaghetti Junction* in 1973¹⁴⁷ and *The Seed* in 1977¹⁴⁸, when a play written by two white playwrights, Derek Nicholls and Ray Speakman, featured actors from black and Asian communities. The Rep's prejudice was evident in 1975, when the board rejected David Edgar's play *Destiny*, dealing with fascist issues and racial politics in the West Midlands. The following production involving the black and Asian community did not arrive until 1985, when Nigel Moffatt's *Mamma Decembra* was produced in its Studio in collaboration with the black theatre company Temba.

The appointment of John Adams as the artistic director of the Rep in 1987 however, brought about a significant change in the policies and practices of the theatre. The policy of integrated casting that commenced with his first production which included four black actors has remained a permanent feature of the Rep since then. "Adams' appointment also heralded an intensification of black theatre in the Studio" argues Crow. (Crow, 2006: 111) Besides in-house productions by black British playwrights such as Hanif Kureishi and Mustapha Matura, it also included touring productions by black theatre companies like Temba and Third dimension.¹⁴⁹ The commitment to multicultural theatre was thus firmly established.

Adams' successors, Bill Alexander and Jonathan Church have continued the Rep's commitment to multiracial casting and the latter has

¹⁴⁷ *Up Spaghetti Junction* featured a sole black actor in its sketch on the local Asian community in Birmingham, only the second occasion when a non-white actor received the opportunity to appear in a Rep production.

¹⁴⁸ *The Seed* engaged seriously with the issue of inter-racial marriage between a Pakistani man and a white British woman and the complex identity of their offspring.

¹⁴⁹ Policies of the Rep further extended into outreach projects aimed at reaching working classes and multi-ethnic audiences along with attracting the younger generation who would have never envisaged visiting the Rep theatre to watch a play.

even moved a step further by reinstating previously successful productions on the main stage and introducing new playwrights to the theatre scene. Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's first play *Besharam* (2001) set in Birmingham, premiered at the Door, the former Studio re-launched with a new name in 1998, exclusively dedicated to the production and presentation of new work. Bhatti's play was soon followed by Lloyd Withers's *No Sweat*, Jatinder Verma's *Journey to the West* (2002) by Tara Arts, *South* (2003) by the Vayu Naidu Dance Company and Shelley Silas's new play *Calcutta Kosher* (2004) by Kali Theatre. They have all provided opportunities for witnessing drama about diverse multi-ethnic experience and reflect the multicultural realities of Birmingham and the Midlands region. As a result of such impressive efforts, there has been a substantial improvement in the reception of multicultural work at the Birmingham Rep, but the consistency in theatre attendance is still significantly lacking.

Brian Crow expresses no hesitation in criticising the Birmingham theatre audience for their inconsistency: "the black and Asian Birmingham public, it would seem, is no less fickle than their white Brummie counterparts in their theatre-going habits" he comments. (Crow, 2006: 114) Endeavouring to solve this ongoing nationwide problem of declining theatre audience, a crucial issue was highlighted by some famous playwrights in British theatre. In a letter to the artistic directors of a number of regional playhouses across the country, endorsed by sixty-eight playwrights, they asserted that in order to halt the "failure either to gain new audiences or keep old ones" it was

necessary to provide opportunities to new playwrights by allocating more time and resources for their work.¹⁵⁰

Although popularly endorsed by local playwrights, some inherent problems emerged from the proposal. Both at the Rep and at other regional playhouses, the management have traditionally been reluctant to stage new productions in their main studios because of the lack of audience. The problem is further enhanced in case of plays by 'ethnic' playwrights, where the 'risk-factor' is higher in attracting audiences. To counter this, the Rep has adopted a policy where The Door is assigned the responsibility of producing new work, especially by black and Asian playwrights, reflecting Birmingham's multi-ethnic society. Despite carrying an increased risk of failure, the Rep's bold policy conforms to the recommendations of the 1994 letter and affirms its belief that a small studio like The Door can sustain risk better than the main house.

The black playwright Pinnock however, disagrees with the multicultural ethos of British theatres like the Rep. She argues that "despite the marketing of 'Cool Britannia' as a new and exciting multicultural society", in reality, "the multicultural is notably absent" from theatre. (Pinnock, 1999) Similar views have been shared by several contemporary black and Asian playwrights, striving hard to consolidate their playwriting careers. A number of playwrights like Jenny McLeod and Tanika Gupta have encountered

¹⁵⁰ In the playwrights' opinion, there has been a "drastic decrease" in the number of new plays produced and that there is a diminishing allocation of funds for new plays. To rectify this shortcoming, they recommend that the artistic directors produce at least three new plays annually in their playhouses, among which two must be staged in their main house. It was also mentioned that these should be full-scale productions and must include at least eighteen performances. (Pledge, 1994)

unfavourable experiences ranging from being used as a 'token' black writer to facing problems finding a breakthrough. Gupta, in particular has expressed dissatisfaction at literary managers who "constantly want to 'develop' her work, but not actually get to the point of staging it" (Aston, 2003: 129) and McLeod opines: "Most theatres don't take risks on black playwrights, or on women playwrights". She adds that "Winsome [Pinnock] and I can write as many plays as we can write, and all of them can get put on, but it is still not enough". (McLeod, 1997: 50)

There has also been a significant lack of critical attention at the body of theatre written and produced by black and Asian women playwrights. A key reason for this is that such works do not neatly fall into the categories of postcolonial, intercultural or world theatre. They deal with lived experiences and preoccupations of people residing in contemporary Britain rather than considering themselves as the 'other' within British society. This transformation in the content of writing by the new generation playwrights and their questioning of norms most definitely necessitates more critical attention on their cultural productions and requires analysis of their work alongside mainstream productions in Britain.

Behzti

Artistic productions by new generation black and Asian playwrights have gained prominence within British arts industries in the new millennium and their work is being increasingly developed and recognised in response to the recent developments in the socio-political scene. Such culturally specific artistic production arises from an environment that might be described as a

“cultural vortex” claims Suhail Khan.¹⁵¹ In such a situation the “individual is challenged to produce artwork relating to the current environment and circumstances he or she has been brought up within or been placed in as a result of parental migrancy”. (Khan, 2006: 162) Located in a ‘liminal’ position, these artists face new challenges as they evolve and negotiate complexities of contemporary life resulting in both positive and negative experiences. The second generation Asian Sikh playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s play *Behzti* (Dishonour) (2004) commissioned by the Birmingham Rep is a perfect example of such artistic expression. The play is about a disabled widowed mother from the Sikh community who is eager to find a suitable match for her daughter, visiting the Gurdwara for the purposes of socialising and matchmaking.

Artists of the new generation use various arts, such as theatre, performance and visual media “to explore the terrain of opportunity in defining the ‘now’”, claims Khan, producing art that “responds to issues of race, ethnicity, culture, politics and religion”.(Ibid) A similar artist may be found in Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, who has had a long association with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and was commissioned to write new plays as part of their attachment scheme promoting new work by playwrights from ethnically diverse communities. Belonging to the British born generation, the Bristol graduate Bhatti has combined acting and playwriting as part of her career. While being attached to the Birmingham Rep, she has received considerable success as a playwright through her debut play *Behsharam* (Shameless) in 2001 which broke box office records both at the Rep and at

¹⁵¹ Suhail Khan is the Consultant Co-ordinator of Cultural Diversity of Greater Manchester.

London's Soho Theatre. Bhatti has also written scripts for popular radio and television channels as well as on-going soap-operas. However, what has really brought her to the limelight and made her famous, if not infamous, has been the controversy surrounding her second play *Behzti* (2004) a black comedy based on the Sikh community in Britain.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, sometimes engaging with contemporary social and political issues obliges new generation black and Asian playwrights to make a break with the community as a result of changing values across generations. Thus we find playwrights like Bhatti embarking on controversial journeys to provide a critique from within their community, as in her play *Behzti*, first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre on 9th December 2004. In the Foreword to the play, the playwright states her intent unequivocally: to uncover "all that is anonymous and quiet, raging, despairing, human, inhumane, absurd and comical", lying beneath the surface of the Sikh community. (*Behzti*, 2004) Despite having such explicit and valiant intent, the performance of the play was forcefully cancelled on Monday, 20th of December 2004. The closure was enforced following violent protests from the Sikh community at the Birmingham Rep, the Sikh community leaders enraged at the depiction of sexual abuse and murder at their holy place of worship, the Gurdwara.¹⁵² The Rep was "in a state of siege" asserts Tripathi, with children attending a pre-Christmas pantomime

bewildered at the sight of 400 enraged protestors threatening to storm the theatre. Later that afternoon, the mob attacked the building, shattered glass,

¹⁵² The play was originally scheduled to run at the Rep until the 30th of December 2004.

destroyed back stage equipment and injured several police officers.
(Tripathi, 2005)

The Rep authorities were forced to close down the performance due to impending threat to safety of the audience.

Before moving on to a discussion of the furore surrounding the play and the encompassing issues, it is necessary to detail the plot, key scenes and characters in the play. Among the short array of *dramatis personae*, seven in total, the protagonist is Maninder, or Min as she is popularly referred to in the play, an overtly simple member of new generation Britons. She is a dutiful daughter who has completely relinquished her social life in favour of being a carer for her mother. Min is so far removed from the public realm and social life *per se*, that she has hardly participated in any Sikh religious events or been part of the wider community. Her identity is circumscribed by her filial duties towards her house-bound mother leaving her ignorant of complexities of the life 'outside'. At the end of the play however, she is awakened about the cruel ways of the world with a rude jolt. She is raped by Mr. Sandhu, head of the Gurdwara but her own mother, along with other ladies of the congregation, fail to believe in her and beat her. There is a shift in her positioning towards the end of the play when she crosses the 'threshold' by accepting the hand of a young black man, Elvis. Gliding along the 'liminal' spectrum, she is able to make a new beginning with an alternative social position, breaking free from the shackles of her constricted life and establish herself as a 'Liminal Briton'.

Min's mother Balbir is painted with more colour than her daughter. She is seen to be immobile and incontinent, requiring help from both her

daughter and the social service to perform routine activities. The audience is gradually made aware that her physical ailment and irritable nature has been caused by sufferance of trauma through her husband's tragic death and unexpected alteration of the family's circumstances. Her vision is coloured by her thoughts and fancies that are far removed from reality, matching her physical separation from the outside world. Both mother and daughter however, have a foul mouth, their frustrations finding reflection in their use of abusive language towards each other.

Language, a defining feature in the writing of new generation black and Asian playwrights, is used dextrously by Bhatti to communicate both cultural specificity and candidness of the British-born generation. While the former is articulated through use of Punjabi words, especially with reference to the Sikh rituals at the Gurdwara and chants to the Lord: "Vaheguruji kha khalsa vaheguruji khi fateh!" (*Behzti*, 2004); the latter is expressed in the regular banter between mother and daughter, peppered throughout the play. This is a feature specific to the Punjabi culture as much as it is a reflection of British culture. By employing abrasive language and reflecting open relationships between mother and daughter commonplace within Punjabi culture, Bhatti is attempting to capture their language and culture without stereotyping. Short staccato sentences are used to manifest the anger and frustration engulfing the characters. The unstable and often turbulent relationship between mother-daughter is transmitted when Balbir is seen frequently referring to Min as "bloody shitter", "lump of lard", "fat virgin" among other undignified adjectives. (*Behzti*, 2004) Use of foul language from the start of the play sets the harsh tone of the drama about to unfold.

Mr Sandhu's construction is perhaps the darkest, pervading the shadowy world of the play. He is portrayed as a deceitful character by Bhatti, symbolic of the hypocrisy underlying the facade of justice and righteousness marking the exterior of the Sikh community. His dual personality is evidenced in his attire – with or without the turban. By donning the turban, we see a physical and psychical transformation of a commonplace man into a seemingly honourable and virtuous head of the Gurdwara, a shrewd entrepreneur in a position of power, which he uses strategically to play mental and physical games with the congregation. Hiding behind a veneer of moral uprightness, he carefully orchestrates the immoral events unfolding at the Gurdwara. In the latter stages of the play it transpires that Mr. Sandhu was a good friend of Min's father Tej and that he had engaged in a homosexual relationship with him. It is only when Min is reminded by Mr. Sandhu about the event during her childhood when she had spotted the two men kissing, that she realises the truth behind the facade and the real motive behind her father's tragic suicide. Tej had given up his life engulfed in feelings of shame. A cunning machinator, Mr. Sandhu however, nonchalantly passes the blame for her father's death on Min, a defence mechanism that he seems well versed in. Power is his major focus – and rape is the way he wields his power over both men and women. In the course of the play, it is revealed that he has raped most women attending the Gurdwara, young and old, in the guise of acting as a 'bacholan' (matchmaker) for prospective brides and grooms. Min had been spared thus far as she and her mother had extricated themselves from the community after Tej's death. Visiting the Gurdwara for the first time as a young woman,

Min inevitably falls prey to the evil man's ploy and he rapes her. Not stopping at this heinous deed, he even offers his hand in marriage to her. His temerity enrages Balbir to the extent that she ruthlessly stabs him to death with the Sikh religious sword 'kirpan' towards the end of the play.

Through the character of Mr. Sandhu, Bhatti paints a dark picture of the Sikh community and underscores the immorality underlining the activities of advocates of religion. This is an interesting feature of Bhatti's artistry as she is stepping outside tradition and challenging the shortcomings within her own community. Like Chadha in *Bhaji*, Bhatti too occupies a place 'within' her culture and uses it to disrupt the norms and point to its inconsistencies. In place of the celebratory note of earlier plays by the older generation playwrights, we find hints of accusation and condemnation, an emphatic denunciation of the depravity and decadence in prevalence in the Sikh place of worship. As witnessed in case of literary texts and films, new generation playwrights also possess an uncanny boldness to confront issues that have been traditionally pushed under the carpet to maintain equilibrium and status quo. Issues related to marriage, religion, generational differences that have been overlooked by earlier theatrical productions are now confronted directly and existing stereotypes challenged. Bhatti's provocative play is a testament to this fact.

The two supporting female characters in the play are Polly and Teetee. The former a middle-aged widow, is seen vying for attention and is desperate for emotional support from any man, even if it means stepping outside her community to be with Balbir's black social carer Elvis. Her licentiousness leads her to kiss Elvis in the Gurdwara and persuade him to

engage in a relationship with her. Heavily influenced by tabloid news, she fantasizes:

We'll live like outcasts and hold our heads up high and sell our story to the papers if there's enough interest. We'll shop together in anonymous supermarkets and scour holiday brochures for cottages in remote hilly locations. I'll wear micro-minis and drink babycham! We'll live like kings! (*Behzti*, p98)

While possessing such a frivolous streak herself and being ready to embark on a relationship shameful in the eyes of her community, Polly does not hesitate to reprimand Min for wearing a bloodstained salwar. Mistaking the stain to be caused by menstrual discharge and thereby polluting the holy place, she is spiteful to Min: "So much behzti. Nasty filthy dog!" (p117) Polly's malicious comments clearly bring to the fore her selfish and hypocritical nature, living a life by rules that only suit her. Her character is also reminiscent of the elderly ladies in *Bhaji* who were judgmental about the younger women and dismissive of their behaviour.¹⁵³

Teetee on the other hand, is deeply absorbed in the well-being of her children, connecting her own satisfaction with that of her sons. She is worried about her younger son in particular; whose success in business she feels will bring him happiness. She tries her best to secure the contract for the extension of the Gurdwara by submitting herself to Mr. Sandhu so "that [he] give(s) him one small chance ... in return for all [he] has taken ... in return for stealing my body and my soul". (p132) Realising that her dreams won't be fulfilled, she turns defiant and raises the sword to kill Mr. Sandhu. Balbir, whose wound is fresher, takes charge to slay the dragon as it were and

¹⁵³ Her character is not dissimilar to that of Asha in *'Bhaji on the Beach'* where she fantasizes a life of fantasy with the white gentleman she meets at Blackpool, but doesn't hesitate to insult Ginder when she runs away from her husband.

obtain revenge for the years of atrocity meted out to the community. Teetee is not just a uni-dimensional character as the readers may be led to believe. Her insightful comment about the gender dynamics in a Sikh household demonstrates her depth of character:

Our men are cruel to our women but we get used to it and we follow the rules, letting each slap and tickle and bruise and headbutt go by. And at the end of this rubbish life, we write the rules. (p100)

She is able to skim the surface and look beneath at the hypocrisy of the community and the circularity of the tradition throughout generations. It is this kind of intuitiveness that provides her with the courage to pick up the sword against the brutality of Mr. Sandhu, although she doesn't go ahead with the act of killing him. Once again, we find a resemblance with events in *Bhaji* when the elderly women undergo a transformation of attitude at the end of the film when they confront the reality of the situations and problematic relationships.

Among the supporting male characters are Jaswant the 'Giani' and Elvis, Balbir's carer from Social Service. The Giani appears to be a simpleton, a country bumpkin almost, although shrouded in enigma. Perhaps the least hypocritical of Bhatti's characters, he has been endowed with a conscience and some moral scruples which prompt him to question: "But suppose you haven't been... very good inside... for a very long time ... and what if you can't ... become a butterfly?" (p72) Lurking beneath his simplistic manners is the ability to observe reality with a sharp eye and a conscience more active than others. His enigmatic mannerisms allow him to utter the kind of truth that other characters cannot in the given environment. In most situations, he is observed communicating in words from the Scriptures rather

than his own. The Giani is seen to correspond with other members of the Gurdwara by quoting the *Guru Granth Sahib* in particular. In a way, Bhatti makes Giani the speaker voicing the ideals of Sikh religion, uttering sentences like, “God always looks after the weak, protects believers and destroys evil”, ideals that are ironically violated in God’s own home, the holy Gurdwara.(p103) The irony is more pronounced as the ideology of the religion articulated by the Giani is juxtaposed to the corrupt Mr. Sandhu, who is the Giani’s own brother, as well as against an institutionalised background that does not have the strength and courage to protect its members from moral violation and deception.

The last but not the least important character in the play is that of Elvis, the young black boy who has been assigned as a carer by the Social Services to help Balbir. He is the ‘outsider’, both literally and metaphorically, belonging outside the Sikh community, providing the voice of reason in the play. He is the sounding board, as it were, against which various religious customs and practices are sounded by both Min and other members attending the Gurdwara. His inquisitiveness about an alien culture combined with a genuine love interest in Min allows him to attempt to understand the values perpetuated by the religion and hold a spotlight to the reality of the situation. Finally, it is he who is the bearer of hope, showing light at the end of the dark tunnel in which Min finds herself in after being raped. Fittingly, the last scene is entitled ‘Resurrection’, as it is by accepting Elvis’s love and arm, that Min manages to be literally and metaphorically resurrected from the depths of ignominy to ‘find’ herself again. It is once again ironical that the literal and metaphorical revival of Min is only possible with the help of Elvis,

an 'outsider', by stepping outside the 'threshold' of her Sikh community. Following the strict boundaries and ethical codes couched in her religious doctrine, which are in reality wholly unethical, would not have allowed her to gain any liberation.

The 'Behzti Affair'

In the Foreword to her play, Bhatti mentions that "The heritage of the Sikh people is one of courage and victory over adversity". (*Behzti*, p17) It is with a similar kind of courage that she ventures to challenge the status quo and authority of the Sikh religious community in her play *Behzti*. Feeling "imprisoned by the mythology of the Sikh diaspora", Bhatti undertakes the task of holding a spotlight to the injustices and hypocrisies inherent in the community, issues that are well concealed under the ardour and achievements of its members. She justifies, "I wrote *Behzti* because I passionately oppose injustice and hypocrisy" and is explicit about her aim to provoke debate.(p18) Bhatti is aware that "writers sometimes cause offence" but is ready to affront the dialogue and discussions the play generates in the hope of changing society for the better. However, it is debateable whether she ever envisaged the kind of reception the play was to receive.

The reasoning behind the violent protests following the staging of *Behzti* was that it dramatises sexual abuse, rape and murder within the setting of a Sikh Gurdwara. The responses were many and varied. While one reviewer found the play "awe-inspiring", a "masterpiece full of wit, grit and wisdom" others were not so benevolent. (Uusitalo, 2004) Following negotiations preceding the 'official' performance of the play, Sikh leaders

entered into a dialogue with the theatre management attempting to alter certain aspects of the play that were deemed offensive, especially its location in a Gurdwara. It was agreed that a leaflet voicing their grievance would be handed to the audience prior to every performance. However, the act was insufficient and organised protest was mobilised by the Sikh community. After the first performance, threat from a Sikh community leader cited in the *Birmingham Mail* read: “Violent scenes outside a Birmingham theatre could be repeated unless changes [were] made to a controversial play”. (Newey, 2006: 327) Representing Britain’s 336,000 Sikhs, Sewa Singh Mandha, Chairman of the Council of Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham informed BBC Radio: “In a Sikh temple, sexual abuse does not take place, kissing and dancing don’t take place, rape doesn’t take place, homosexual activity doesn’t take place, murders do not take place.” (Tripathy, 2007) Fiona Mactaggart stated¹⁵⁴: “When people are moved by theatre to protest ... it is a great thing ... that is a sign of the free speech, which is so much a part of the British tradition”. (Ibid) Antithetically, the Rep’s own Artistic Director Stuart Rogers, in charge of cancelling the last ten performances asserted in *The Telegraph*: “It is a matter of great concern to us that illegal acts of violence can cause cancellation of a lawful and artistic work and that freedom of speech can be curtailed by violent acts”. (Britten, 2004) Representations in the print media about the provocativeness of the play were also contradictory. Diane Parkes of the *Birmingham Evening Mail* for example, observes that it was inevitable for *Behzti* to spark controversy, “but it does so without any apparent aim” and accuses Bhatti of “not actually looking at ...

¹⁵⁴ Fiona Mactaggart was the Minister in charge of Racial Equality in 2004

issues [of rape, murder and violence within the Sikh community] with any depth”; *The Times*’ perception was different. (Parkes, 2004) Sam Marlowe of *The Times* labelled it as ‘an artistic tragedy’ and reported that while “it was not hard to see what perturbed them”, referring to the Sikh community, it was nevertheless “a scorching indictment of repression and hypocrisy”. Marlowe clarified that the play “is not an attack on the Sikh faith” but “a condemnation of the kinds of abuses that can occur in any society. While she has chosen Sikh society as her focus, it is obvious that Bhatti’s concerns are wider”. (Marlowe, 2004)

The ‘official’ version was however, more circumspect and discreet. Some party leaders from the Birmingham City Council issued a joint statement that while they deplored the acts of violence by some of the protestors they also welcomed the Rep’s decision to withdraw the production in the interests of public safety. The statement also mentioned the need to “continue discussions with all community leaders across the city to ensure sensitivity to community values and expectations can co-exist with the freedom of artistic expression”. (Parkes, 2004) This kind of political statement endeavours to strike a balance between keeping the community happy and fostering artistic expression.

Such contrasting reactions and enforced closure of the play left the young Sikh playwright in a quandary, forcing her to express hurt and frustration in January 2005:

I am still trying to process everything that’s happened – my play, *Behzti*, has been cancelled; I’ve been physically threatened and verbally abused by people who don’t know me; and my family has been harassed and I’ve had to leave home. (Bhatti, 2006)

She even complained of being “frightened into silence” and having to deal with “the practical issues around my own safety and that of those close to me”. (Ibid: 335) The forced cancellation of the play also prompted Janet Steel, the Director of the play to comment:

...we all went through the pain of having our work taken off as a result of violent bullying. We all had to compromise our artistic integrity by allowing in a hostile audience before the show was ready to be exposed. We were never indicted for racial hatred; we were the victims in a political scenario and we all suffered. It makes me angry. (Steel, 2005: 121)

The anger and ‘behzti’ (insult) was therefore on all fronts – the playwright, artists, producers and a large part of the audience. An angry young Asian woman’s attempt at telling a story and conveying a message was thus rudely curbed in a manner reminiscent of the Rushdie affair of the 1990s. As a point of comparison, the Rushdie affair too was pitched as a controversy between Bradford Muslims versus the cosmopolitan rootless Rushdie. In fact, Rushdie’s sentiments after the ‘*fatwa*’ incident matched those of Bhatti and Steel: “I feel as if I have been plunged, like Alice, into a world beyond the looking glass, where nonsense is the only available sense. And I wonder if I’ll ever be able to climb back through.” (Rushdie, 1991: 413)

The erupting controversy related to the play led to overlapping discourses; “arguments that slithered between secular and religious rights, culture, gender and race”. (Grillo, 2007: 7) It highlighted issues such as the importance of Gurdwaras in Sikh social and religious life and raised questions about the binaries of gender and religion, individual and community as well as the issue of censorship and freedom of speech. Grillo argues that the issues are not simple:

the *Behzti* affair is seemingly about the incommensurability and incompatibility of religious and secular values in a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-faith society, the conflicting rights of freedom of speech/artistic licence and the protection of religious sensibilities, articulated through two sets of voices: the liberal artistic establishment, and Sikh community representatives however, the issues were not clear-cut. (Ibid:6 - 7)

He points to the complexity of the issues in a pluralistic society, brought to the fore as a result of the debates that ensued. Though ostensibly offending Sikh religious sensibilities, what the play really attacked were the core Sikh values of masculinity and family and the “transgressive image of Sikh womanhood”. (p7)

Sikhs comprise a significant proportion of British Asian population and has members who are both first generation immigrants, now elderly, and those that are of the British – born generation. Originating mainly from the Punjab region of India, many of them are ‘twice migrants’ who immigrated to the UK via East Africa where they had settled initially during the colonial era. Though residing in urban areas across Britain,

30% live in the West Midlands metropolitan area, including Birmingham, rather more in London and its environs, especially the suburbs around Heathrow airport, and in the satellite town of Slough, where some 10% of the population is Sikh.¹⁵⁵ (Harris)

As the figures suggest, a large proportion of Sikhs reside in Birmingham, a city that prides itself on the multicultural mix of its population. The cultural distinctiveness of this Sikh population is pointed out by Roger Ballard: “Sikhs, with their distinctive combination of beard and turban, are a classic example of a group whose members have used physical and cultural symbols to construct an ethnic identity around themselves”. (Ballard, 1994: 88) While making their appearance unmistakeable, their beards and turban sets them

¹⁵⁵ The UK census of 2001 found 336,000 Sikhs in Britain although Sikh sources report twice that number.

apart from all other communities and “underlines an ideal of non-differentiation”. (Ibid)¹⁵⁶ In Birmingham, the Sikhs are well-integrated, the men having won the right to wear turban in place of helmets as required by certain uniforms.

Although not all Sikh men follow their principles strictly, nevertheless their religious identification remains firm. The younger generation in particular are more cosmopolitan, not fully committed to the outward symbols of their faith.¹⁵⁷ (Tripathi, 2005: 163) Developing originally as a ‘reform’ religion following conflicts between Islam and Hinduism in the Indian subcontinent, there are three things central to Sikhism: Gurus (holy men), the Sikh scripture *Guru Granth Sahib* and the Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship), all of which are held to the spotlight in the play. The religion is organised and disseminated through Gurdwaras, but its community role is equally significant – performing as “the main centres for social and cultural activity as well as religious activities within the Sikh community”.¹⁵⁸ The importance of Gurdwaras in Sikh community life is thus immense and cannot be disregarded. Moreover, in the recent years religion has become a major

¹⁵⁶ Ballard explains, “...the Sikhs themselves invariably represent their community as homogenous and particularly close-knit ... The adoption of the title Singh by all males and Kaur by all females sets them deliberately apart from all other communities, but also explicitly underlines an ideal of non-differentiation, while the beard and turban have exactly the same effect”. (Ballard, 1994: 88)

¹⁵⁷ Salil Tripathi comments that “Many marry outside the community, many men are clean-shaven. They question their elders and their practices, and it is this that troubles the more orthodox elements. The elders complain about the disintegration of the community; the younger ones feel stifled by the previous generation, most of whom are first generation immigrants”.

¹⁵⁸ The Council of Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham states that “in addition to religious services, many Gurdwaras also administer and financially support some of the following services: supplementary schools; arts and cultural provision; ... welfare services; advice and support; community kitchen; ... liaison with media and wider communities; ...” Annual Report for 2001 by the Council of Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham quoted in (Grillo, 2007: 9)

channel through which communities provide representation and consultation. Under the rubric of 'faith communities' and the emergence of 'faith' councils, there seems to be a new-found confidence among religious groups in voicing their opinions and grievances, a confidence heightened since, as Yasmin Alibhai Brown explains, successive governments have 'pandered' enabling these groups to be "over-powerful in the dialogues of the nation". (Alibhai-Brown, 2005) In the light of the privileged power of the Gurdwara, by locating the moral and sexual violence in the Sikh holy place of worship, Bhatti's play *Behzti* has raised uncomfortable questions and performed sacrilege as it were, a blasphemous act unpardonable in the eyes of those in charge of the Gurdwara and the wider community living by Sikh principles.

Moreover, as mentioned before, the play has not only offended religious sensibilities of the Sikhs, it has assailed the Sikh values of masculinity and patriarchy. At the helm of the '*Behzti* affair', debates and violence were the British Sikh community leaders who were responsible for fuelling the controversy as the play had hurt their persona. As Hundal claims:

Not only are those who run Gurdwaras (and are by default labelled as 'Sikh leaders') from the first generation, they're also overwhelmingly men ... Having grown up through the fight for civil rights, legal recognition of the turban and riots against the [far right British National Party], they harbour a very defensive attitude over their portrayal in the media. (Hundal, 2005)

In their efforts to establish a distinctive identity for themselves in Britain as well as globally, the Sikh leaders, who are predominantly male, are keen to safeguard their masculinity. In the process, there is an elision of Guru Nanak's principles about the status of women. In Sikhism, gender equality is prevalent in most aspects with no scriptural sanctions against women. In reality however, the situation and practice is quite different. (Por, 2005) Such

equality is not universally practiced as evidenced in the context fictionalised in the play. Moreover, the implication of homosexuality and shameful male conduct in a Gurdwara in the play also challenges Sikh ideology of masculinity. Brian Axel refers to “Sikh subjectification through masculinized symbols and imagery” in his books on the Sikh diaspora. He argues that this subjectification is achieved through “bodily techniques, religious practices, visual representations, and narratives of Sikh ‘identity’... Sikh men became the privileged site for negotiating who could be recognised as a member of the Sikh ‘*panth*’”. (Axel, 2001: 4) Exposure of the inequality in gender relations within the Sikh community and challenges posed to Sikh masculinity are determining factors leading to the furore that emerged following the opening performance of the play on the 18th of December 2004. An actor who had witnessed the protests remarked:

On that night it felt like a lot of testosterone [was] thrown at this little female play. The great powerful mass of men who had been roused to crush it because it, the tiny thing threatened them somehow. (Dispatches, 2005)

Masculine values had been wounded and hence the vicious reaction forcing closure of the play.

The questions relating to freedom of speech is another key issue highlighted by the ‘*Behzti*’ affair’. The question is two pronged as on the one hand it relates to whether an individual has the freedom to speak against or challenge their community and on the other, it refers to the artistic licence of a playwright. The Gurdwara is an open space of worship where anyone is allowed to pray. The Sikh religion does not specify that only clergy are allowed to lead prayers; the laity has equal powers. But as a Sikh individual, a member of the community, Bhatti questions the level and quality of control

within the Gurdwara. She asks “What if the men and women who manage the *gurdwara* are not up to the task?” She aims to confront her community through her play. In the Foreword she elucidates:

Clearly the fallibility of human nature means that simple Sikh principles of equality, compassion and modesty are sometimes discarded in favour of outward appearance, wealth and quest for power. I feel that distortion in practice must be confronted and our great ideals must be restored. (*Behzti*, p17)

By making such explicit claims, what Bhatti is intending to do is to wash the community’s dirty linen in public, an image depicted in the cover of the book and poster for the play which is highly gendered. Limited opportunities are available for British Asians to voice their grievances in the public sphere and it is further limited in case of Asian women, with their hands tied by imposed restrictions from within and without their community. Their choices are limited by their ascribed roles as “as guardians of sexual morality; transmitters of cultural values to the next generation; and vessels bearing the honour of the community”. (Gupta, 2005) The events in the play are a recognisable reality, claims Rahila Gupta of the Southall Black Sisters, cases that are deliberately stifled.¹⁵⁹

Theatre, for the black and Asian community, is a ‘liminal’ space creating a bridge between mainstream and alternative theatre. It is an alternate public space available to some British Asians and Bhatti uses it to continue the much truncated literary and theatrical tradition to convey her message to her community. Pnina Werbner’s comment on the use of the

¹⁵⁹ Gupta claims that “These are the more dramatic cases, but on a daily basis, women find their aspirations quashed by religious leaders. They cannot leave oppressive homes because of the stranglehold of culture, religion and enforced mediation by religious leaders”. (Gupta, 2005)

media as a public arena for conveying such message in the film *Bend it like Beckham* can be transposed on this play:

[a] resistant and yet complicit public arena produced through the entertainment industry ... that tells the story of a cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, of inter-generational conflict, inter-ethnic or inter-racial marriage, family politics and excesses of consumption; a cultural arena that makes its distinctive contribution to British and South Asian popular culture by satirising the parochialism and conservatism of the South Asian immigrant generation. (Werbner, 2004: 897)

Resistance against the community by an individual playwright from within the Sikh community is thus performed through the 'space' of the play.

Resisting subjugation is pivotal in the works of most new generation women artists and Bhatti seems no exception. As Ash Kotak notes specifically in case of Bhatti:

My generation of writers define themselves against the elders who have suppressed us ... they are attempting to end the silence that exist around abuses and injustices that take place within their communities. (Kotak, 2004)

Speaking about Bhatti and other new playwrights, Miranda Husain also comments that they "sought to challenge her (their) community to lift the veil of silence and hypocrisy on the exploitation of women by a patriarchal society". (Husain, 2005) Bhatti herself reinforces similar intention in the Foreword of the play –"only by challenging fixed ideas of correct and incorrect behaviour can institutionalised hypocrisy be broken down". (Bhatti, 2004: 17) By lifting the lid on what happens in reality, Bhatti wishes to expose the hypocrisies inherent in her community and resist subjugation, thereby providing a challenge to the keepers of the Sikh faith.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ What we witness here is that something that had small and quiet beginnings in the black and Asian women's writing workshops and collectives in the 1980s has now escalated to a radical tradition in the new millennium - the revelation of crimes against and within the community. The ideas have brewed and resistance has grown organically through the years

Speaking in a similar vein from the perspective of a British Asian artist, Roshan Doug, the poet-in-residence at the Birmingham Rep, voices his desire to expose in his works,

certain communal anomalies, certain injustices that were (and are) clearly visible in some parts of the Asian community, especially in its treatment of girls ... But, more importantly, I wanted to depict that strange relationship young Asians have with cultural suppression on the one hand and the freedom of expression on the other. (Doug, 2004)

As a new generation British Asian poet, Doug points to the willingness of young artists and playwrights like Bhatti and himself to openly engage in important and controversial issues in their work, that dominant members of the community wish to suppress.

Through her play, Bhatti also challenges the traditional notion of the 'Asian family', questioning relationships within the family. Like many British Asian artistic productions, Bhatti's play challenges the hegemonic notion of the 'Asian' family as solid, supportive and morally strong in opposition to the dysfunctional relations within the 'western' family. Repulsive behaviour between mother and daughter Balbir and Min, portrays the collapse of traditional notions of family ascribed by the Asian community. In fact the virtues of Sikh womanhood, with an emphasis on "honour, submission, modesty, sexual purity, domestication and obedience" are all disrupted in the play *Behzti*. (Guru, 2003: 8) ¹⁶¹ This betrayal of Sikh ideals of femininity, as it were, has been deliberately configured by Bhatti to illustrate the transformation required by new generation Sikh women who have to

by means of various women's groups and has found culmination in such a brave act as *Behzti*. The gradual erosion of integration in contemporary British society has caused problems in relations within the community and finds exposure in this provocative play.

¹⁶¹ Guru has studied Punjabi ideals of femininity among women in Birmingham.

transcend the categories of 'normal' women to negotiate complexities of life in contemporary Britain.

Debates about a playwright's right to freedom of speech and expression have always been problematic. The question arising out of the '*Behzti* affair' is whether a play should be considered to be a work of art or should it be treated as representative of the community and setting in which the play has been situated. Although Bhatti's intention was the former, many of the protestors assumed it to be representative of the community that the author comes from, the Sikh community. Similar assumptions apply to the content. With murder and rape in the play taking place in the Gurdwara, it is easy for the audience, having limited knowledge of the Sikh community, to assume that such acts are commonplace in the Sikh holy place. To clarify such misunderstanding, Bhatti herself issued a statement in January 2005:

There can never be any excuse for the demonization of a religion or its followers [...] I certainly did not write '*Behzti*' to offend. [...] For a story to be truly universal, I think it is important to start with what is specific. Though the play is set in a Gurdwara, its themes are not just about Sikhism. (Bhatti, 2005)

Freedom of speech and liberalism are customarily democratic rights of citizens who live in a society based on moral justice. The Sikh religion also upholds several instances when the Gurus (religious leaders) have stood up for freedom of expression. Yet, it is an irony, that there has been such uproar when a playwright has depicted contentious issues in a Sikh religious context within a liberal multicultural society. In the immediate aftermath of the protests, Bhatti received unequivocal support from majority of the artistic community defending her right to freedom of expression. However, accusations and death threats were raging elsewhere for maligning the

religious sensitivities of the Sikh community. The extremely polarised response provoked debates about freedom of expression from various quarters. In defence of Bhatti's right to freedom of speech, the Rep's Artistic Director stated at a conference in London that the protest was demonstrated by people with "no understanding of the concept of fiction" and that they were "naturally against freedom of speech". (Greene, 2005) In the opinion of the protesters, to dramatise is to insult or condone, blurring boundaries between representation, enactment and/or promotion. The artist's ability to foster imagination and empathy are ignored by them in favour of their greater right not to be offended.

Despite threats and protests from large sections of the Sikh community, artistic licence and freedom of expression were defended by some members of the political world. A centre-left leader commented in *The Independent*:

The threat of mob violence should not curtail the right of artistic expression ... Broadly secular societies such as Britain, are not immune to the gathering storm of intolerance and zealotry that is buffeting the world. (Grillo, 2007: 13)

Speaking of the British context, Rushdie too asserted in an interview: "In this country, it is the liberty of any artist to express their view on their own society and their own community". (Sayal, 2004) However, in Britain's multi-ethnic society, the reality is that diversity and tolerance rub shoulders uneasily with freedom of expression. Due to this, playwrights under attack, like Bhatti, have to reinforce their intention and justify their artistic creation:

I believe that it is my right as a human being and my role as a writer to think, create and challenge. The dramatists who I admire are brave. They tell us life is ferocious and terrifying, that we are imperfect, and only when we face our imperfections truthfully can we have hope. Theatre is not necessarily a cosy space, designed to make us feel good about ourselves. It is a place

where the most basic human expression - that of the imagination - must be allowed to flourish. (Bhatti, 2005)

In spite of such clarification, the debate received further incentive as it intersected with the government plans to introduce legislation to outlaw 'incitement to religious hatred'. When enforced, such a law would make it illegal for any artistic production to be critical or satirical of any religious faith or practice. The proposed bill was to curtail public right to freedom of expression and prevent artists from creatively exploring their society. This prompted vehement opposition from intellectuals such as Rushdie who declared:

It seems we need to fight the battle for Enlightenment all over again..... The idea that any kind of free society can be constructed in which people will never be offended or insulted, have the right to call on the law to defend them against being offended or insulted, is absurd ... do we want to live in a free society or not? Democracy is not a tea party where people sit around making polite conversation. In democracies people get extremely upset with each other. They argue vehemently about each other's positions. (But they don't shoot). (Rushdie, 2005)

Rushdie's intervention had far-reaching consequences as it opened up further debates about secular, democratic and humanist principles in opposition to rising religious demands. Rushdie along with others considered this problem a 'worrying aspect of life in contemporary Britain'. (Rushdie, 2005)

Others however used the debate related to the '*Behzti* Affair' to restate their opposition to multiculturalism. Minette Marrin claimed:

Western ideals of the centrality of freedom of speech cannot and must not give way to the demands of any other culture or religion. This is where multiculturalism has to stop. Minority cultures cannot expect an equal part with the host culture in deciding [the] limits. (Marrin, 2004)

In the opinion of certain British journalists and novelists, multiculturalism has led to the creation of 'theocratic enclaves' in Britain which should not be

tolerated. The racist undertones of such comments only compounded the complexity of the debate. Presenting an Asian perspective, Sunny Hundal points out that “in the desire to be politically correct, British institutions end up listening only to highly vocal and organised religious groups” believing that they are representative of their communities. However, “for young British Asians who want to tell their own stories through theatre, it can mean facing an environment where censorship is imposed on them by their own community”. (Hundal, 2005)

In a letter to *The Guardian*, Sarita Malik points out that the freedom of speech, which is the lynchpin of liberalism in arts, is actually “deeply racially coded”. (Malik, 2005)¹⁶² The arguments put forward here refer to the limits of free speech in relation to religious difference due to racial sensitivities. The majority and minority debate along with blurring of boundaries between religious and racial identities has thus fuelled the debate on the ‘*Behzti* affair’. In order to restore status quo between ‘us’ and ‘them’, Rahila Gupta suggests that it is necessary to tackle both the racism of the “liberal intelligentsia” and the “authoritarian strands in our own communities”. (Gupta, 2005)

¹⁶² Expanding on this comment in the context of *Behzti*, Helena, an audience member from Birmingham claims in a BBC programme: “It is in [a] climate of fear and mis-education and misunderstanding that we are asking a mainstream theatre to put on a play featuring sexual abuse in one of the holiest sites of Sikhism. This ceases to be a case of free speech, but becomes an issue of sensitivity, consideration and responsibility. The already well-ingrained ignorance would only be fuelled by this sort of play. If only we lived in a society of educated, non-prejudiced, non-racist people that did not have pre-conceived misconceptions about certain minority groups, then we could consider exercising our freedom of speech and putting out into the mainstream theatre-scenes of abuse within holy sites – because only then would we be sure that ignorant groups of people would not blow this out of proportion and draw further misconceptions about a minority ... we have to be responsible when portraying already potentially vulnerable groups.” (BBC ‘Comments’, 2004)

Hundal sums up the confusion and upheaval resulting from the 'affair' very succinctly: "Liberals railed about freedom of speech without having watched the play or understood the context, religious leaders jostled for media attention, while ordinary Sikhs came out feeling annoyed and embarrassed". (Hundal, 2005) Different sections of the population with their respective objectives used the 'affair' as a site to articulate their interests and grievances. The conflict between artistic licence and religious sensibilities only bear a synecdochal relation to the 'affair'; the whole is much greater than the part.

A regional theatre's audacious attempt at staging a provocative and controversial play has thus had far-reaching consequences. *Behzti* was not just a play but a unique phenomenon which engendered responses and interventions from all quarters – artists, academics, intellectuals, politicians, religious leaders and the general public, unlike the previous artistic and literary productions discussed in this project. The closure of the play and subsequent developments were covered by the media widely – newspapers, television, radio, internet - both nationally and globally. The vociferous opposition of Jerry Springer's Opera by certain Christian groups, intense parliamentary debate on the proposed bill to make inciting religious hatred an offence, production of further provocative plays by other British Asian playwrights, coverage in non-English speaking nations like France and Italy, were all outcomes of the play. Neither the Birmingham Rep's management responsible for the cancellation of the play, nor the violent protestors, had ever envisaged the massive potential of this play by a new generation British

Asian female playwright to challenge norms and create history for posterity to look back and review.

Another major outcome of the play beyond the arena of freedom of speech is the fact that it exposes complexities concealed in the all-embracing phrases like 'ethnic minorities' and 'the Asian community'. Suggestions of a sense of monolithic, unity and sameness in relation to the labels 'Asian' or 'ethnic' community are dispelled by the play *Behzti*. "The Behzti affair has brought into the foreground the inadequacy of such labels", argues Brian Crow, along with "the habits of thought associated with them in today's society". (Crow, 2006: 125) The suppressed generational tensions within one community, the Sikh community in case of the play, can also be identified in any other community, even white society, in contemporary Britain.

Moreover, following the 9/11 terror attacks and the consequent 'War on terror', it has been widely observed that the pressures generated by the events negated any validity that existed in the idea of a homogeneous 'Asian community'. Increasing attention to Islam meant that Hindus and Sikhs struggled to distance themselves from 'trouble-making Muslims'. Manzoor observes that in the effort to negotiate various issues confronting British Asians in contemporary Britain, new generation Britons seem to be "identifying themselves by religion rather than race" thereby generating new discourse of difference.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Crow, p126. Crow points out that Sarfraz Manzoor investigated the issue in "Don't Call Me Asian" on BBC Radio 4 on Tuesday, January 11 2005, at 8pm. This is an extremely significant intervention as it points to a move beyond the homogeneous Asian community and invokes the employment of religion as a marker of difference.

As stated before, Birmingham Repertory Theatre aims to broaden the appeal of their productions to diverse communities by staging plays that dramatise issues and experiences of these communities. However, poor audience numbers have been an interminable problem of regional theatres like the Rep, and by appealing to 'ethnic' patrons, they attempt to halt their long-term decline in audience figures and ensure sustainability. The furore and controversy related to the staging of *Behzti*, has alerted the Rep management that by presenting challenging and controversial work by new playwrights, they have to risk confronting hostility and even violent protests and consequently suffer significant financial losses. To their credit however, within a few weeks of the *Behzti* affair, the audacious Rep has staged further provocative plays such as depicting murder in a Muslim brothel but has managed to avoid any protest. In fact Stuart Rogers, the Artistic Director has affirmed that "We've certainly done work since then that is as controversial, if not more so. The difference is that we haven't gone out and told people about it. So it hasn't changed our policy in the slightest".¹⁶⁴ (Harris) Moreover, the Birmingham City Council who provides substantial funding to the Rep has remained indifferent to the furore over '*Behzti*'. Hence, there has been no external pressure on the Rep to alter their strategy to commission and stage new and provocative work.

The Other Arts Projects

"Birmingham's arts scene is vibrant and diverse, reflecting its population" claims a Birmingham City Council website. (The Arts in

¹⁶⁴ S. Rogers, Interview Transcript, August 8, 2007 quoted in Harris.

Birmingham) The truth in the claim has already been evidenced in the discussions relating to film and performing art scenes in this chapter and literary arts in the Midlands region in the preceding chapters. To complement such artistic endeavours there are certain initiatives and institutions which provide further channels for artistic expressions for the region's black and Asian artists. Having local, national and global dimensions, these projects and organisations are able to showcase the multiplicity of talent lurking in the region, otherwise submerged under the aura of the 'multicultural' locus of London.

One such organisation is Sampad, which aims to "develop a deep and distinctive structure of South Asian arts in Birmingham and Britain through production, promotion, advocacy, education and outreach activity". (Sampad, 2009-2010) Apart from providing a platform to South Asian cultural aspirations, Sampad endeavours to "reflect the socio-cultural and identity issues affecting communities of the South Asian diaspora" in Birmingham. (Ibid) Set up in 1990 by Piali Ray, their work has primarily concentrated on promoting South Asian dance and music. Sampad has recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary which coincided with the re-opening of MAC after significant refurbishment.¹⁶⁵ Operating as a joint venture, both attempt to

¹⁶⁵ The Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) is a newly refurbished 'space' where black and Asian artists from the Midlands can exhibit their work. In order to meet the needs of the vibrant multi-ethnic community and urgent need for state-of-the-art theatre studios in Birmingham, the MAC in partnership with Sampad has developed an arts centre which can offer to host exciting artistic productions and create opportunities to showcase the work of reputed national and international visual and performance artists. The new visual arts studios will be hosting the 'We Will Stand' event comprising three photographic series commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Miners Strike of 1984/85 in the forthcoming months. In the exhibition, Moira Lovell revisits locations in the Midlands and South Yorkshire where major political events took place, and provides images of the miners and their landscape as a reminder of the loss of an industry, the passage of time and the departure of the coal mining

create a 'space' that is symbolic of a new way of reimagining contemporary Britain and reflect the 'inter-cultural' society of Birmingham.¹⁶⁶

Another organisation having a mission to develop artists, increase audiences and connecting communities is Ulfah Arts. Founded in 2004, the organisation is committed "to creating opportunities for artistic and media development through working with a variety of partners for all concerned in the sector, including artists, arts organisation, art and media forms, media professionals etc". (Ulfah Arts) Unlike Sampad, which focuses on the South Asian community, Ulfah is targeted towards working with the Muslim community, Muslim women in particular, whose creativity and artistic expression is less visible in Britain's cultural environments.¹⁶⁷

The Drum in Birmingham is a national centre for black British arts and culture. Located in Aston and firmly rooted in its local community, "the Drum is dedicated to developing and promoting contemporary art and culture of British African, Asian and Caribbean communities". (The Drum) Their mission

community, images that have been fictionalised in Meera Syal's novel, *Anita and Me* discussed in the previous chapter.

¹⁶⁶ Through the years, Sampad's sphere of activity has expanded to involve a variety of creative arts of new generation Britons from diverse 'ethnic' backgrounds. In the last year, it has engaged in a three-month community project, 'Positive Activities for Young People', where youngsters have worked with Sai Smith, a film-maker from Birmingham. Among Sampad's professional development programmes has been the 'Creative Leap' programme, aiming to enable Birmingham-based artists to initiate a career in the creative arts industry.

¹⁶⁷ Operating in the disciplines of music, performance, visual art and heritage, Ulfah's projects are both national and international. Among its core arts projects is the 'Muslim Women Music Makers', which is an annual touring production supporting Muslim female artists and audiences from the local community. 'Untold Stories' is a partnership project with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre to develop thirty writers in spoken word and script writing. Among Ulfah's media projects is the 'MWMMedia' (Muslim Women Media Makers) designed to create a digital platform for Muslim women to showcase their work. 'The Ulfah Collective' are a female band comprising practising Muslim women from varied backgrounds such as Pakistani, Somali, Bangladeshi, Arab and Jamaican backgrounds. Performing mainly to women only audiences, the band brings together different interpretations of Islam. The lyrics and vocal compositions are prepared by the group locally and performed at venues nationally expressing a new ethnicity.

is to “facilitate the development, celebration, performance and exhibition of the diversity of Black arts and cultures for the benefit of all”. (Ibid) It provides a supportive environment where black and Asian artists can pursue and develop their artistic endeavours as well as broaden the appreciation of these arts by engaging the whole community.¹⁶⁸

The role of these organisations and their collaborative projects have been critical in providing black and Asian artists from the Midlands the much required platform and opportunity to develop and display their artistic expressions. The visibility of black and Asian women’s artistic endeavours have definitely increased greatly as a result of the support from these arts organisations and funding from the Arts Council of England. The activities of these organisations also reveal that performance can intervene and disrupt dominant notions of community, gender and nation.

Conclusion

It is apparent that cultural productions of black and Asian women in the last two decades have all had ‘universal appeal’, with focus on

¹⁶⁸ Projects undertaken by the Drum are similar to those of Sampad and often in conjunction with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Some are exclusively Drum projects such as ‘Word Up’ where local poets, spoken word artists, singers, rappers are all invited to perform their work and “have the opportunity to interact with editors, publishers, theatre producers and other members of the West Midlands poetry scene”. (Word Up in Literature) The project is led by Drum’s in-house poets as well as guest poets from various black and Asian backgrounds –Jamaica, India and Trinidad. The Drum also conducts seminars on issues related to black and Asian experience in contemporary British society. ‘Handsworth Rebellion: Revisiting Handsworth 25 Years On’ was one such seminar recently held in collaboration with the Birmingham University. It attempted to “place the rebellions in the broad and politically dynamic context of Handsworth and Britain in the 1980s”. As witnessed in the earlier section of this chapter, the Handsworth rebellion had a profound impact on British cultural politics in the last two decades of the previous millennium and provoked intense debates that encouraged a reimagination of ‘Britishness’.

generational and gender conflicts and inter-cultural relationships together with an unmistakeably 'ethnic' dimension. These artistic expressions have helped to "de-ghettoise the black and Asian experience and establish it as an integral part of the everyday realities of contemporary British society". (Steinberg, 2004: 205) The implication however is not that these productions, whether film, drama or the other arts have resigned their commitment to cultural politics, their struggle against racism as well as problems related to mis-representation which dominated discourses in the earlier years. All these problems still persist, but new generation black and Asian women have simply chosen to highlight more pressing concerns which affect their existence in contemporary British society without de-marginalising the older concerns.

Struggles encountered by the black British film-makers and their collectives have paved the way for the flourishing of black and Asian cultural productions since the late 1980s, black and Asian film-making in particular. While the production of *Handsworth Songs* brought the Midlands into focus and heralded the renaissance of black British film-making, Chadha's film *Bhaji on the Beach* indicated the movement of black and Asian film-makers into 'mainstream' film production and provided a perspective on the British-Asian community from 'within'. *Bhaji* also brought to light how new generation women film-makers like Chadha are questioning the norms and disrupting existing binaries and stereotypes to make a feminist film. The 'liminality' of British-Asian existence in contemporary Britain is evident from the analysis of the film. Like the writing workshops and collectives, the other arts and performance in particular, can also be viewed as a 'liminal' space

from which speaking subjects can articulate their views. The performing arts demonstrate ways in which playwrights can intervene and disrupt dominant notions of gender, community and nation. Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* exhibits how new generation playwrights employ different modes in their writing. In her play Bhatti provokes by disrupting traditional norms of femininity and filial relations through performance. What is crucially evidenced in Bhatti's play is that the agency of multi-ethnic women writers and artists that had modest beginnings in the black and Asian women's writing workshops and film collectives in the 1980s has now escalated and given rise to a radical tradition in the new millennium - the revelation of crimes against and within the community. The ideas have brewed and resistance has grown organically through the years by means of various women's groups and has found culmination in a temeritous production as *Behzti* in 2004. Furthermore, the play marks a shift in focus from racial identity to religious identity. Following the Rushdie Affair and 9/11 terror attacks, religion has become a preoccupation among writers of the new generation, marking a new trend in their artistic expression. It is plays such as *Behzti* that are heralding the new discourse of difference within contemporary British society – and reinforcing the fact that race has been transmuted by religion. The regional production houses and arts organisations have also played an important role in increasing the visibility of these new generation artists and enhanced their opportunity for incorporation within 'mainstream' cultural productions.

The Conclusion

In her poem '*Beauty*', Grace Nichols critiques European aesthetics with the lines: "Beauty/ is a fat Black woman". (Nichols, 1984: 7) She writes with the intention of turning English stereotypes upside-down. This project too has been driven by the objective of inverting some stereotypical English ideologies and challenging the centrality of London, the assumed nucleus of multicultural activity. It has been my endeavour to 'decentralise' multiracial Britain and illustrate the rich tapestry of work woven amidst "regional and economic unevenness of the black *British* landscape", the Midlands in particular. I have intended to highlight the diverse ways in which 'Britishness' is articulated by new generation black and Asian women in this region through their literary and artistic productions. (Procter, 2003: 142)

This thesis has explored disconnections and differences between the two constituencies of black and Asian Britons – the post-war migrant generation and new generation 'Liminal Britons'. The genealogy of black Britain that emerges from this project is one that is discontinuous rather than marked by a smooth evolution. While on the one hand this project has put a spotlight on the ways in which Midlands' women artists have represented changes in the ideas of 'Britishness' beyond the metropolitan 'centre' of London, on the other it has revealed that issues dealt by the new generation are not the same as their predecessors. What emerges is the story of a literary and artistic tradition that is much truncated. Quiet musings through the 'liminal' spaces of inconspicuous workshops and collectives have

gradually grown into prominence through radical artistic expressions manifesting the transformations undergone by 'Liminal Britons' as they have shifted positions within the 'liminal' spectrum of contemporary British society in the last three decades.

The chosen collections advocate what John McLeod astutely points out about black writing in a recent article,

a significant constituency of contemporary black writing of Britain offers a revisioned articulation of the nation that is distinctly polycultural, even post-racial – one that goes beyond the affective and political concerns of black Britons and demands adoption by all kinds of British subjects. (McLeod, 2010: 51)

In the work of these new generation black and Asian artists and writers we detect a new envisioning of a British nation that is diverse and multicultural, reflecting concerns beyond racial and cultural preoccupations, a fact that requires recognition and perhaps even 'adoption' by all British subjects. Speaking specifically about literature, McLeod argues that such works are "prompted, but not preoccupied, by racial and cultural specifics", marking a shift in trend in black and Asian British writing. (Ibid: 48) I would like to extend this argument to include all cultural productions, both literary and artistic, by black and Asian artists where such a shift in trend is evidenced; a claim validated by my project.

In his article McLeod refers to contemporary black writing of Britain being "characterised more and more by the work of women writers", a fact that endorses the focus of this project on women artists and writers. He also asserts the opening up of "a range of new vistas which are quite some distance removed from the purview of 'Black British writing' as it has been predominantly understood". (Ibid: 46) Moving away from the documentary

realism and preoccupation with dislocation, poverty and racism in post-war black literary and artistic productions, new generation multi-ethnic women writers and artists, since the 1980s, appear more concerned with themes of identity, belonging, relationships, generational conflict and everyday realities of living in contemporary Britain. In the 'politically engaged' works both in literature and the other arts, it is the 'lived' experiences in England that take precedence over nostalgia for a 'home' left behind, since Britain is 'home' for these new generation Britons.

The most important distinctive feature is their fundamental assumption that they are British; citizens of the British nation. As Sesay asserts "They see themselves, growing up, as being part of British society" thereby considering themselves "centred at last"; no longer being part of the margin. (Sesay, 2004: 103) In fact, Stuart Hall describes them as occupying "a new kind of space at the center" from which they "look as if they own the territory". (Hall, 1996) Arana labels this as a "sea-change" in the identity of black Britons, 'Liminal Britons' as I call them, possessing altered foci which finds expression in their literary and cultural productions. (Arana, 2004: 19) In quest for a sense of belonging, they are seen to adopt multiple selves and glide along a 'liminal' spectrum, fluidity rather than fixity being their defining feature. It has been my argument throughout this project that heterogeneity of these Britons is better captured through the paradigm of 'multi-liminality' than with Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity' that has dominated discourses on black British cultural production in the last decades.

Emerging strongly from this project is the role of the community in supporting, encouraging, disseminating and receiving literary and artistic

expressions from the region. The success of such artistic endeavours relies greatly on the part played by the community that an artist belongs to. Locating themselves either 'within', 'outside' or on the 'edges' of their respective communities, artists of colour use the community "as a professional network and a sounding board in a landscape where they still often have to look hard and in particular directions to see themselves, or aspects of their cultural heritage". (Woolf, 2010: 7) The role of the community has been conspicuous in supporting and creating the Asian Writers' Collective which provided an essential platform for emerging writers like Randhawa and Syal, discussed in the first chapter, enabling them to hone their skills and gain confidence to approach potential publishers. The short stories in the anthologies discussed in the second chapter have also emanated from community writers' groups in the Midlands that have been instrumental in developing local talent and fulfilling aspirations of emerging writers which would otherwise have remained unrealised. It is also evidenced how certain arts organisations engage in and assist local disenfranchised communities in creating cultural productions, thereby regenerating the inner city areas of large multi-ethnic cities like Birmingham.

However, the community's role is not always positive. Feminists have always viewed it with scepticism, envisioning the community as a double-edged sword, where they may feature as a source of support but in case of patriarchal communities they can prove detrimental. It was the so-called community that had incited violent protests in Birmingham leading to the closure of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti*, examined in the third chapter. These were acts that have been pivotal in engendering debates

about artistic licence and censorship but more crucially have placed the Midlands in the 'centre' through its evocation of a new discourse of difference within contemporary British society – that of religion. By questioning the homogeneity of the Asian community and initiating debates about censorship, artistic productions such as '*Behzti*' have sought to re-define the whole 'centre' and periphery dialectic and the location of the Midlands within it.

Through this project I have attempted to contradict the dominant reading of London as the hub of multiracial Britain and entered into a critical engagement with what James Procter has called "devolved" diasporic cultures throughout Britain.¹⁶⁹ As Fowler suggests, an exploration of "the complex experiences, identifications and insights" of black and Asian writers has given rise to "intimate engagements with places other than London".¹⁷⁰ (Fowler, 2008: 82) The mainstream publishing world however has continued to undermine and ignore articulations of regional writers and it is only up to the onus of small independent publishers and organisations to support and disseminate the diverse expressions of these regional multi-ethnic artists. Echoing Fowler's assertion, I too want to stress on the "need to pay greater attention" to black and Asian literary and cultural productions "that engage with the specificities of non-metropolitan glocalities". (Ibid: 89) There is also a growing need for researchers and University curricula to shift focus away from the coterie of nationally acclaimed writers and artists to a broader range

¹⁶⁹ James Procter has been involved in a project entitled "Devolving Diasporas" as part of the AHRC's 'Diaspora, Migration and Identity' scheme where he refers to the regions as being 'devolved'.

¹⁷⁰ Fowler had been involved with Lancaster University's 'Moving Manchester' project which aimed to catalogue the literary output of Manchester since the 1960s.

of new generation black and Asian women writers and artists struggling to achieve their presence from the regions.

In spite of endeavours from a limited number of publishers and academicians, it is a travesty of justice that ultimately the artists' hands are tied by political bureaucracy and whimsical funding allocations. As we have seen in chapters one and three, publishing houses, regional repertory theatres and cultural organisations all depend on governmental policies and Arts Council grants for their sustenance. In contrast to London, where renowned publishing houses queue to obtain their copyrights on fiction by black and Asian writers, regional Midlands writers are at the mercy of a handful of publishing houses who possess the altruistic aim of promoting local talent and work from those whose voices have remained submerged under the thunderous claims of London-centric expressions.

Following the Coalition government's recent Comprehensive Spending Review, it is claimed that "publicly-funded arts organisations will face a 6.9% funding cut next year as part of the Arts Council England's attempts to meet the budget requirements". (Williamson, 2010) The West Midlands Director of the Arts Council England, Ros Robins asserted: "These funding cuts will seriously affect our West Midlands budget, and they are made worse by the fact that about 80 per cent have to be introduced in the first two years". (Walker, 2010)¹⁷¹ Justifying their actions, Dame Liz Forgan, Chair of the Arts Council England has pointed out:

¹⁷¹ Ros Robins, West Midlands director of Arts Council England, has commented: "We have worked hard against a background of reducing budgets to create a varied portfolio of arts

These measures are designed to ensure a strong and resilient future. The country needs its artists at a time like this and we are about building, as well as sustaining, our unparalleled arts and cultural sector. (Williamson, 2010)

Ironically, the sustenance of these arts organisations are fundamentally dependent on funding from the Arts Council of England and without its support, their very existence will be in jeopardy.

Piali Ray, the Director of SAMPAD has voiced her concerns over the proposed funding cuts and has described the forthcoming years as “challenging times” with the need to “cleverly manage resources”. She has also spoken of the “pressure to deliver as widely and to the standards that we maintain”. Furthermore, Ray expresses her anxiety regarding further cuts by the Birmingham City Council which provides approximately forty percent of its funding. (Ray, 2010) True to her apprehension, the Birmingham City Council has recently announced significant cuts in the arts sector. A local business website has claimed: “Small businesses in Birmingham’s arts sector could see their council funding cut completely as the local authority slashes its support for the arts by £3.5million over the next four years”. (Small arts funding cuts, 2010)¹⁷² In the light of such reports, the development and

organisations across the region.... We recognise the important role that Birmingham plays as the ‘cultural capital’ of the region with many major institutions based in the city”. (*Birmingham Post*, 2011) Among the major organisations to undergo cuts in funding are The Birmingham Rep which is estimated to lose £ 135, 138 in funding, while the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry is due to have £72, 561 taken from its budget. The recently refurbished Midlands Arts Centre which houses arts organisations like SAMPAD is liable to have £54,000 slashed off its £789,000 budget along with the IKON Gallery, Birmingham’s centre for visual arts, which is likely to take a cut of £74, 404 from the proposed funding changes. Small arts organisations like the SAMPAD and The Drum dedicated to the promotion of black and Asian literary, visual and performing arts also face significant cuts from their budgets. While the former has to confront cuts of £17,973, the latter is due to lose £43,693 in terms of funding. The various publishers who are likely to face the cuts are Birmingham’s independent regional press Tindal Street. Tindal Street’s budget of £52, 473 is likely to be reduced to £48,852.

¹⁷² The website also provides insight into an unpublished council report which reveals “16 arts organisations out of 22 who receive grants from Birmingham City Council having all support withdrawn by 2013/14. The six that remain will see their budgets reduced by up to 28%”.

promotion of regional artistic production from the Midlands cannot envisage a promising future ahead.

The proliferation of black British cultural productions in response to the legacy of the 1980s which reflected new modes of articulation thus faces a serious threat in the years to come. Black and Asian women's literary and artistic productions that have battled to surface despite the tides of patriarchal oppression of a white hegemonic society are likely to come across further stumbling blocks in their struggle to achieve a 'presence'. However, being new generation women they possess fearlessness and an impulse to tackle the ship on the head. Their vision is coloured by an optimism that their predecessors had relinquished and they are empowered with an urge to negotiate the complexities that life in Britain will bring. Being creative artists they are certain to find alternate avenues of expression and refashion public conception of British identity through their literary and artistic expressions. The agency of such 'Liminal Britons' is their most unique and empowering characteristic and is certain to inspire them to challenge the proposed reductions in funding. Their resistance should compel the government to rethink its policies and reinstate funding that is absolutely crucial for the existence of regional artistic and literary productions. The story of a literary tradition that has had its beginning in the Midlands should not be allowed to meet an uncelebrated end simply for the insecurity of funding. Instead, the entire nation should watch out for this tradition as 'anything may happen' in this 'liminal' space! It is imbued with immense possibilities!

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