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## From Imperial Capital to Global City: representing the lives of migranths in London through novels, films, and oral history

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## From Imperial Capital to Global City: representing the lives of migrants in London through novels, films, and oral history

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### Abstract

This article explores the ways in which cultural difference has been constructed through artistic modes of representation over time in Britain. This relationship between past and present is explored by an analysis of novels and films produced during the inter-war period and recent contestations involving artists and community activists who seek to represent the social and cultural identity of minority ethnic groups in contemporary multi-cultural Britain. Attention is paid to London in particular, given its key role as the centre of national and colonial government and its development as a global city, whose increasing cultural diversity has been shaped by post-colonial migration. Recent discussions concerning London's reinvention as a global city frequently underestimate the continuities with the former imperial capital. Furthermore, the complexity of who seeks to speak for or

about another is highlighted by the sometimes fraught relationship between artists, who draw on their family ties with former colonies, and London's 'black and Asian communities'.

The article is divided into eight sections. It begins with a short introduction which notes the way in which the role of artists as cultural mediators complicates their position as insiders within the minority communities they seek to represent. Because minorities do not constitute integrated groups the views of artists contribute to a range of sometimes conflicting voices in fields of power and knowledge shaped in the contemporary context by colonial traces. The second section examines multicultural representations of London before the Second World War. Those representations were shaped not only by the class divisions of an increasingly industrial, urban society but also by the divisions of race, religion, gender and language. Jewish writers of the 1920s and 1930s were particularly significant in the expression of those intersecting cleavages and the issues they explored were also taken up by other outsiders such as the renowned black American, Paul Robeson.

The third section takes this discussion forward into the post-1945 period and the growth of identity politics linked to 'black and Asian' political and community activism. This development is analysed in the fourth section through debates concerning artistic freedom, which involved the issues of religion, gender and community representation. The fifth section explores these issues further through an examination of the dispute concerning a popular book set in the Bangladeshi community of London's 'East End' and this is followed by a related discussion of oral history as an 'authentic' representation of minority communities in the sixth section. There follows a brief consideration in section seven of what the article has revealed concerning the survival of colonial traces in London as a post-colonial city and the article ends with a conclusion.

**Keywords:** representation, government, migrants, contestation, global city, identity

## 1. Introduction

This article will focus on artistic representations of issues involving minorities and how ethnic community activists in particular reacted to these. The aim is to explore questions concerning the relationship between the representer and the represented and the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. The practice of artistic representation forces artists to distance themselves from what they seek to represent. Their reflexivity inevitably moves them away from the centre to the periphery of their 'community'. They become cultural mediators and, thereby, are no longer pure

insiders. Indeed, this process of social and cultural distancing may result in their being criticized as outsiders by local community representatives. Communities become sites of contestation which highlight the complications involved in attempting to speak for others. Texts produced by themselves and others were written from a particular position. Although minorities were usually presented in multicultural discourse as coherent entities grounded in certain cultural traditions, this was a convenient myth. There was no integrated community whose voice could be articulated through its representatives but, rather, a range of voices expressing different and sometimes conflicting views in fields of power and knowledge shaped by the traces of empire.

## **2. Multicultural representations of London across time: developments before the Second World War**

The celebration of London's cultural diversity has usually focused on the effects of immigration since the Second World War. However, a number of studies have revealed the extensive lineage of this diversity (see, for example, Fryer 1984; Visram 1986, 2002; Eade 2000; Chatterji, Washbrook, 2013). Yet this diversity largely escaped the attention of artists, novelists and ethnographers before the Second World War. Those arriving from Britain's expanding empire sometimes appear as servants in 18<sup>th</sup> century portraits of aristocrats, for example, or are mentioned in such pioneering urban ethnographies as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) and the contribution by Beatrice Webb (née Potter) on the 'East End' in *Inquiry into the Life and Labour of the People in London*, Charles Booth's magisterial series published between 1886 and 1903. Migrants were primarily associated with poor, working class areas despite the arrival of some professional people, university students and Indian princes from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards (see Visram 1986). If they were noticed the usual assumption was that their presence was temporary: they would return to the colonies where they 'belonged'. They were viewed with a mixture of suspicion and patronising interest – exemplars of exoticism and orientalism (see Said 1978) – but those who exposed the cleavages of race and class in British society before

the Second World War were not intimately associated with empire. The largest number of migrants were Irish Catholics and therefore British subjects before 1922. They were the targets of religious prejudice while the arrival of Jews from Poland and Russia during the 1880s excited anti-semitic feeling. The other substantial influx of migrants – German Protestants – created far less interest until the rise of anti-German feeling before the First World War.

Representations of outsiders were shaped, therefore, not just by the class cleavages of an increasingly industrialised and highly urbanised society but by discourses and practices, which revolved around race, religion, gender, sexuality, and language. During the period between 1800 and 1950 the ambiguities and uncertainties of the relationship between the British nation and its empire were concealed to some extent by a process of boundary maintenance. The boundary distinguished between an Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority and others – Catholic and Jewish immigrants, temporary migrants from the colonies and those who decided to stay on rather than return to the far-flung empire. These outsiders were largely confined to the inner recesses of Britain's cities – if they moved out into the expanding suburbs they had to assimilate as much as possible to narrow the distance between themselves and the national majority.

Although individual writers, musicians and other creative spirits operated during the nineteenth century, the most significant development was the emergence of Jewish novelists from London's East End between the two world wars. They were brought up in Jewish working class communities, which were heavily dependent on certain industries, especially the manufacture and trading of textile goods. They engaged with the political struggles of the day – trade union organisation, political mobilisation by Labour, Communist, and Zionist groups over unemployment, housing conditions and rising fascism. They also took a keen interest in international developments such as the development of the Communist state in Russia, the rise of anti-colonial movements, Jewish migration to Palestine and conflicts in Spain leading to the civil war. Their ethnic and class background differed strikingly from writers associated with what came to be broadly known as the 'Bloomsbury group' and they sought to contribute to what became known as the 'working class novel' with its em-

phasis on social realism and political engagement (see Worpole 1983). Their Left-wing sympathies led them to criticise the social and economic inequalities of British industrial capitalism and to identify with anti-colonial movements across the British Empire. London was, in their view, the centre of an exploitative political and economic system and, for some at least, the imperial capital represented the antithesis of the new social relations being forged in the USSR.

The impact of Jewish writers during the inter-war period was confined largely to left-wing circles and the East End. A wider awareness of the social and cultural issues they explored was encouraged by individual artists, particularly with the arrival of the multi-talented black American artist, Paul Robeson, during the late 1920s. He articulated many of the political and social issues with which the Jewish writers were grappling – racism, the divisions of industrial capitalism, colonialism, and fascism. Although he appeared in the British experimental silent movie, *Borderline* (1930) which explored racial and sexual tensions, his involvement with local communities was limited. Within Britain his closest contact with working class communities was forged through his focus on the plight of unemployed Welsh miners. His involvement began after a meeting in 1928 with ‘a group of unemployed miners who had taken part in a ‘hunger march’ from South Wales to protest their poverty and harsh working conditions’ (Robeson, n.d.) while he was performing the musical *Show Boat* in London. He visited the South Wales coal mining area during the 1930s to perform and sang in the North Welsh town of Caernarfon in 1934 ‘to benefit the victims of a major disaster at Gresford Colliery, near Wrexham, where 264 miners died’ (idem). P. Robeson’s commitment to the cause of the Welsh miners was also expressed through the 1940 film, *Proud Valley*. The film was set in a South Wales mining locality and P. Robeson plays an American sailor who joins a local choir, finds employment as a miner and dies during a mining accident where he saves the lives of his fellow workers.

### 3. Artistic representations after the Second World War and the growth of identity politics

Despite the continual flow of people from the empire before the Second World War, the students, sailors, servants and aristocrats did not intend to stay long. Those who settled were too few in number to create a significant local presence, even if some were able to facilitate the later growth of urban communities through their social networks. The arrival of workers from the empire from the late 1940s onwards led to a radical change in the ethnic and racial composition of many British cities, particularly London. The changes taking place within Britain were intimately linked to global developments as the empire began to unravel and artistic representations sought to express these transformations by drawing on the everyday lives of the emerging communities.

During the 1950s and 1960s those representations focussed primarily on the political and cultural life of migrants from the Caribbean. The issue of 'inner city' racial tensions had been highlighted by the so-called 'Notting Hill riots' of 1958, increasing anti-immigrant political agitation and legislation designed to restrict immigration from the 'New' Commonwealth. These political tensions formed the backdrop to a growing body of artistic representations, which sought to reflect the interests and aspirations of both the first and the emerging second generation of 'black British' citizens. They drew on cultural traditions from the countries of origin as well as resources provided by the British cultural industry (music, poetry, novels, film, television, and radio). In films Paul Robeson and other African-American actors were followed by those from the Caribbean and Africa, e.g. Robert Adams, who appeared in films from the 1920s and took the lead role in the 1946 film, *Men of Two Worlds*, where after a period as a musician in London he returns to his African village to teach music (Men of two worlds, n.d.)

Films begin to move from black characters as itinerants to placing them within black communities from the late 1950s. *Sapphire* (1959) *Flame in the Streets* (1961), *A Taste of Honey* (1962), *The L-Shaped Room* (1962), and *To Sir with Love* (1967) explored racial and sexual tensions in London locales. This development went in parallel with the contribution by gifted 'black and Asian' writers, e.g. Nirad Chaudhuri, George

Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, and Samuel Selvon. Yet these artists had little contact with the emerging migrant locales – their focus was on the white-dominated literary elite, the mainstream publishing industry and employment opportunities within the BBC (see Sandhu 2003). It was in the area of music that a closer relationship was forged between artists and local black and Asian neighbourhoods, leading to the explorations by an increasing number of ‘black and Asian’ academics from the 1980s, e.g. Claire Alexander, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Virinder Kalra, Raminder Kaur, and Sanjay Sharma.

These artistic and academic representations have also been accompanied by the growth of local ‘black and Asian’ community and political activism. Community organisations, trade unions and political parties provided the platforms on which activists were able to build their following, emerging as borough councillors during the 1970s and 1980s mainly in ‘black and Asian’ concentrations across London. In the 1987 general election a break-through was made at parliamentary level with the election of three ‘black’ Labour Party MPs. During the 1990s and 2000s the growing strength of ‘black and Asian’ representatives from working class ethnic enclaves has been accompanied by a similar development in the spheres of artistic production and the professions.

#### **4. Artistic freedom, religion, gender, and community representation**

*The Satanic Verses* saga of 1989 dramatically signalled that the artistic treatment of certain topics could deeply offend religious and political representatives at both local and global levels. The burning of the book in Bradford at a public meeting held by the Council of Mosques in 1989 was one of the most well-known demonstrations of anger by local community representatives and their supporters. The threat to Salman Rushdie’s life after the fatwa pronounced by the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, and his subsequent going into hiding powerfully challenged western liberal notions of artistic freedom and demonstrated the ability of local leaders to mobilise local minority support and attract mainstream public attention.

As identity politics among British minorities during the 1990s and 2000s became more focussed around religious issues so other minority writers could be sub-

jected to the wrath of local activists. In 2004, for example, the play *Behzti (Dishonour)* written by a second generation British Sikh woman, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, attracted considerable hostility when it was performed in a central Birmingham theatre. She had worked, like many other 'black and Asian' writers for the BBC in London and contributed to two major television 'soaps' *Crossroads* and *East Enders*. On the topic of writing Asian storylines for such programme she had declared perhaps naively that 'if your heart is in the right place, if you ask the right questions, if you make the right choices, anybody can write about anything. [...] It is just about doing it with sensitivity and care and passion' (Profile..., 2004). However, her play, which involved a Sikh 'priest' raping a woman and murder in a *gurudwara* (Sikh temple), led to protests and some violence, as well as death threats made against the author. The president of a local *gurudwara* in Birmingham claimed that the main problem was:

*having these things take place in a temple. Any religion would not take such a slur [...]. We are concerned that people out there who don't know anything about Sikhs will see this and what sort of a picture will they have in their mind? [...] They will paint all Sikhs with the same brush (Anger..., 2004).*

Although the theatre argued that 'the play is a work of fiction and no comment is being made about Sikhism as a faith', the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham spoke up for religious institutions in general - '[s]uch a deliberate, even if fictional, violation of the sacred place of the Sikh religion demeans the sacred places of every religion' (Theatre..., 2004). The play was quickly called off and in the subsequent discussion it was alleged that the protest had been high-jacked by 'extremists' linked to terrorist groups in India and 'outsiders' (O'Neill, Woolcock, 2004).

Given London's economic, cultural, and political importance within Britain and its large concentrations of 'black and Asian' residents a range of artists have sought to reflect on the issues of race, religion, gender, and class through representations of everyday life. Over the last 25 years Hanif Qureshi has produced the most sustained and well known body of work beginning with his screenplay for the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), to his novels *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), and *Intimacy* (1998, adapted for a film in 2001), the film *London Kills Me* (1991), *The Mother* (2003) and the screenplay *Venus* (2006). While he tackles highly controversial issues

such as sexual attraction between a young British Pakistani man and a white National Front sympathiser in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and a mixed race adolescent's escape from London's suburbia to a bohemian life in west London in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, he has not attracted the kind of local community agitation sparked by the publication of the novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), by another 'mixed race' writer, Monica Ali, whose father came from Bangladesh and her mother from northern England. A close inspection of this agitation enables us to explore more deeply the relationship between artistic representations of London's cultural diversity and the local community settings for those representations.

### 5. The Brick Lane dispute, 2003-2006

The title of the book refers to a street which runs through the heart of East London's Bangladeshi settlement. The story revolves around a young woman, Nazneen, who has come from a Bangladeshi village with her two daughters to live with her husband on a run-down public housing estate near Brick Lane. By joining a group of fellow Bangladeshi women to work on garments for the local textile industry, she gradually frees herself from the traditional role of a Bangladeshi housewife. Her 'emancipation' leads to tensions with her bombastic and unsuccessful husband, who eventually returns to Bangladesh to look for better prospects. Nazneen is drawn towards a young local Bangladeshi community activist, who campaigns for a return to a pure Islam but she finds freedom not in an adulterous relationship but through close relationship with her daughters and her group of garment workers. This story of female emancipation contrasts with her sister's elopement from the village with her lover and subsequent hard times in Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital – a story told through the letters in faulty English to her sister in London.

The book was very well received by London's media elite. In 2003 it was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize and won the British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year. Its commercial success led to the release in 2007 of the film, based on the novel. However, this enthusiasm was not shared by some local community activists and their objections were outlined in an eighteen page to the publisher by the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council. Since the vast majority of British

Bangladeshis were linked to the district of Sylhet in north-eastern Bangladesh, this organisation sought to defend the honour of not only those in Britain but also their district of origin. The community representatives claimed that the book portrayed Sylhetis as ignorant economic migrants and a BBC report on the protest highlighted a passage from the novel where Nazneen's husband refers to local Bangladeshis as 'uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition' (Ali's..., 2003). The publisher responded in familiar fashion by asserting that the book was a fictional account and that it found 'both the accusations against it and any demand for censorship ludicrous' (idem).

The reference to censorship clearly expressed concern among the media elite that the controversy was the book and its author might suffer a similar fate to *The Satanic Verses*. Although the dispute died down in 2003, it revived when permission was given to use Brick Lane for the film during 2006. This time the protest was led by Bangladeshi entrepreneurs from the Brick Lane Business Association, which claimed to be speaking on behalf of the Bangladeshi community as a whole:

*People are disgusted about the film, and while the authorities have given permission for it to be filmed here, it does not mean they have permission from the community. [...] We will do what the community wants us to do. We are not going to leave it as it is (Brick..., 2006).*

Given the substantial number of Bangladeshis in the borough council this was a serious threat. What rankled with this group was that Monica Ali was assumed to know about the lives of British Bangladeshis as an inside. In other words, it was not just a work of fiction:

*She is not one of us, she has not lived with us, she knows nothing about us, but she has insulted us. [...] This is all lies. She wanted to be famous at the cost of a community (idem).*

The dispute did not just entail a local minority group pitting itself against the media industry. A leading writer, Germaine Greer, also criticised the book in an article in *The Guardian* during July 2006:

*Ali did not concern herself with the possibility that her plot might seem outlandish to the people who created the particular culture of Brick Lane. As British people know little and*

*care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature. The fact that Ali's father is Bangladeshi was enough to give her authority in the eyes of the non-Asian British, but not in the eyes of British Bangladeshis (Greer 2006).*

G. Greer then raises the issue of the relationship between fact and fiction and the use of stereotypes:

*Brick Lane is a real place; there was no need for Monica Ali to invent it. In giving her novel such a familiar and specific name, Ali was able to build a marvellously creative elaboration on a pre-existing stereotype. English readers were charmed by her Bengali characters, but some of the Sylhetis of Brick Lane did not recognise themselves. Bengali Muslims smart under an Islamic prejudice that they are irreligious and disorderly, the impure among the pure, and here was a proto-Bengali writer with a Muslim name, portraying them as all of that and more. For people who don't have much else, self-esteem is crucial (idem).*

Germaine Greer's intervention quickly drew a rebuke from another major writer, Salman Rushdie, who had been offended by her criticism of *The Satanic Verses* back in 1999. In a letter to *The Guardian* he accused her of being ignorant, racist, pro-censorship and treacherous. Her article was:

*a strange mixture of ignorance (she actually believes that this is the first novel to portray London's Bangladeshi community, and doesn't know that many Brick Lane Asians are in favour of the filming); pro-censorship twaddle [...] and ad-feminam sneers about Monica Ali [...]. At the height of the assault against my novel *The Satanic Verses*, Germaine Greer [...described] me as 'a megalomaniac, an Englishman with dark skin'. Now it's Monica Ali's turn to be deracinated: 'She writes in English and her point of view is, whether she allows herself to impersonate a village Bangladeshi woman or not, British'. There is a kind of double racism in this argument. To suit Greer, the British-Bangladeshi Ali is denied her heritage and belittled for her Britishness, while her British-Bangladeshi critics are denied that same Britishness, which most of them would certainly insist was theirs by right (Brickbats..., 2006).*

Given the history of protest against Salman Rushdie's book, it was not surprising that Bangladeshi protesters threatened to burn Monica Ali's book at a public rally in spite of the film company announcing that it would abandon its plans to film on Brick Lane. The lead 'convener of the Campaign Against Monica Ali's Film Brick Lane' declared that 'the rally would be peaceful' and potentially violent 'fringe ele-

ments' would be deterred from attending but added that if the author had 'the right to freedom of speech, we have the right to burn books. We will do it to show our anger. We don't like Monica Ali. We are protecting our community's dignity and respect' (Lewis 2006). The book burning threat was quickly withdrawn but in an article describing the rally the journalist raised another issue at the heart of the dispute – the role of women in British Bangladeshi society. When asked about the striking lack of women at the rally, protesters referred to the influence of religious conservatism – 'Muslim women are very conservative and they don't feel comfortable coming here' while another claimed that the protest had been 'organised at short notice and obviously our families have children. So who looks after them? [...] My wife wanted to come and face this, but at the moment I have guests' (Cacciottolo 2006). Ironically, this relationship between Bangladeshi women's domestic roles and their public activities was central to Monica Ali's novel.

#### **6. Oral history – an authentic representation of minority communities**

If artistic explorations of minority issues in multicultural London could be criticised for conflating fact and fiction by people, who did not really belong to the communities portrayed in their novels, were oral histories a more authentic guide? This question has particular resonance because of the many oral histories undertaken by ethnic community organisations and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The oral histories were hailed by the HLF as giving 'a voice to ordinary people' and helping to 'shape the heritage of the future' (Cultures..., n.d.). Yet they did not escape the constraints of representing others which dogged other texts – they were written from a particular position and were shaped by the questions asked and by the people selected for interview. While groups involved in oral history projects were encouraged by the HLF to represent 'their' community as insiders, their attempts were always partial and highly selective.

In the light of the controversy swirling around Monica Ali's novel, an oral history project led by Swadhinata Trust, a British Bangladeshi heritage group based near Brick Lane, provides a useful illustration of this relationship between the myth of community and the reality of selective representation. The group was founded in

2000 with the aim of promoting 'Bengali history and culture to ensure its representation as an essential part of the history of Britain and by extension, our contemporary world' (Swadhinata..., n.d.). It also sought to empower young Bangladeshis and help them engage with 'mainstream culture':

*The need for such a Trust has arisen from a sense that, an absence of documentation and social data representing Bengalis' heritage, historical presence and achievements, can contribute towards a sense of marginalisation, low self-esteem and alienation of young people in particular, as part of a minority ethnic community within wider society. This in turn, can limit their participation and contributions to mainstream culture (idem).*

The project 'looked at three generations of being Bengali in multicultural Britain' by interviewing over fifty people and focussing on three themes - (1) the 'dialogue between first and third generation on the history of Bangladesh and the 1971 war of independence', (2) the 'dialogue between second and third generation on welfare and community involvement in the UK, from the 1970s-80s' and (3) the development of popular culture 'focussing on traditional and more recent British Bengali musical heritage' (Eade *et al.*, 2006: 70).

Swadhinata's leaders described it as 'a London based secular Bengali heritage group that works to promote Bengali history and heritage amongst young people' (idem). As a result, even though religious issues had become increasingly important for Bangladeshis in both Britain and Bangladesh, and the leaders of the East London Mosque in particular had gained considerable influence, no religious representatives were interviewed. The sidelining of religion was pursued in Swadhinata's other projects such as the heritage trail which guided visitors around Brick Lane and its environs (Banglatown..., n.d.) and another Heritage Lottery Fund project, this time in collaboration with London Metropolitan University. This project explored the history of the Bengali seamen (*lascars*), who 'served on British naval and merchant ships from the seventeenth century onwards' through a heritage trail across the borough of Tower Hamlets to 'key landmarks such as the docks and buildings' associated with them (idem).

Although the vast majority of British Bangladeshis were Muslims, the only mosque included in both these guides was the London *Jamme Masjid* (Great Mosque)

on Brick Lane. The building had become a well-known symbol of the area's multicultural and migration history since it began as a French Protestant chapel during the 1740s and later became a synagogue before starting a new career as a mosque in 1976 (Banglatown..., n.d.). However, the largest and only purpose-built mosque in the borough was the East London Mosque, whose origins can be traced to 1910 even though it did not occupy local premises until 1940-1941 (History, n.d.). The mosque provided a much wider range of resources than the Great Mosque and supported local welfare and interfaith activities. This openness to outsiders was affirmed in language which neatly fitted government discourse. The mosque's aims sought to:

- *Focus on the needs of the diverse Muslim community whilst ensuring services are open to all.*
- *Meet the needs of the local community by promoting health, education and employment opportunities.*
- *Provide Muslims and non-Muslims with the opportunity to learn and understand Islam, through dialogue, discussion and social interaction.*
- *Contribute to the social, cultural, spiritual and economic enhancement of the whole community, through policy and strategy development and service (Vision, n.d.).*

### **7. Colonial traces in a post-colonial city**

So far this article has examined the contested and positional character of textual representations among those who drew on their origins in the former empire. Yet in what ways are those representations influenced by colonial traces? The answer can be found in the relationship between colonial policies and secular nationalism after colonies gained their independence. By the time the British left India in 1946, for example, local communities had come to be officially differentiated through cultural traditions whose 'natural' guardians were religious leaders and other members of literate elites. The colonial state, on the other hand, sought to confine itself to such secular issues at maintaining law and order and economic affairs. This separation between cultural communities and a supposedly legal-rational state informed Indian

nationalists' understanding of secularism after the British left in 1947.

Although the secular nationalist rhetoric of the Bangladesh government after independence in 1971 has been muted by a turn towards Islam, Bangladeshi activists in Britain have operated within an official environment where the colonial tradition of separating the legal-rational state from 'native institutions' still predominates. The growth of minority organisations, including a plethora of religious centres and representatives, has only encouraged government at central and local levels to encourage uniformity and hierarchical organisation. This centrifugal pressure 'simplifies the task of representing such rich cultural diversity and conforms to the mode of regulating difference with its colonial resonances' (T. Hansen, personal communication).

## 8. Conclusion

This article has explored the issue of artistic representation in the context of Britain's national capital, London. Its prime focus has been the ways in which artists have sought to represent the capital's racial and ethnic diversity not just since the Second World War but before 1939. This approach contributes to the growing realisation that the city's multicultural diversity has roots which developed well before the much-celebrated arrival of the M. S. *Empire Windrush* from the Caribbean in 1948. In other words, the problems involved in representing marginalised people across contemporary London and Britain, more generally, are shaped by traditions which emerged during colonialism. London's status as a global city can conceal a much longer history as a colonial metropolis. The policies and practices, which emerged during the expansion of colonial territories, were not just applied by the British government 'overseas' – they also informed modes of power and resistance within Britain's rapidly expanding towns and cities during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Indeed, migration brought these two worlds of governance together during this period since the largest number of overseas immigrants came from Britain's nearest colony – Ireland.

Before the Second World War the novel and film constituted the two prime vehicles for representing London's social differences shaped by class, ethnicity and race. Although the cinema hosted films which explored class and race through the

controversial black American singer and actor, Paul Robeson, the novel was the main arena where the city's working class artists sought to represent 'their world' to outsiders. In London's 'East End' class, ethnicity and race were brought together in the writings of the Jewish second generation. Given their immigrant origins these novelists showed a keen awareness of life beyond Britain – not the British Empire but the heir to another empire – Russia – and the international struggle between communism and capitalism and against the rising tide of fascism. Indeed, their engagement with these two inter-war conflicts provided a link with Paul Robeson, since he visited Russia in 1934 and supported, during the Spanish civil war, the Republican side against an opposition aided by Italian and German armed forces.

Before the Second World War the divisions of class, ethnicity and race were explored, therefore, by both professional artists and London's working class residents through a lens which gazed at both national and international conflicts and exposed their interconnections. Migration from the unravelling British Empire after 1945 widened the lens through which local, national and global processes could be represented. Multicultural policies and practices, which included substantial funding, provided a bridge between artistic representations of London's growing diversity and local minority community consciousness, on the one hand, and government on the other. These policies and practices encouraged the growth of local activists who increasingly challenged the authority of artists to represent 'their community'. This contestation raised important issues about artistic freedom which were shaped by global conflicts and were most dramatically reflected in the controversy sparked by the publication of Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*, in 1988. The question of who represented whom was posed in a potentially lethal form but it also highlighted the competing claims of local activists to represent 'their community'. Despite attempts by government and local activists to portray communities as homogeneous entities – a practice forged during colonialism – London's inhabitants have shaped a complex web of diverse identities which is reflected in the competing representations and voices described in this article.

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