

Memory and Cultural Identity: Negotiating Modernity in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*

By David Waterman

In the face of cultural trauma and the sense of loss it entails, community cohesion and identity are preserved not so much by remembering as by re-membering, literally using first-generation memories to reconstitute the community, often elsewhere. In Nadeem Aslam's novel *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), "elsewhere" is Britain. Although these Pakistani immigrants have already suffered their first cultural trauma during Partition, a traumatic event which they perhaps share with all Pakistanis, exile further compounds their sentiment of vulnerability on leaving the familiarity of the subcontinent, highlighted early in the novel by their loss of the fifth season, the monsoon (5). While Arjun Appadurai rightly suggests that such deterritorialization "is now at the core of a variety of global fundamentalisms" (38), Lukas Werth nevertheless warns against applying categories from one culture to another without taking the specific context into account, saying: "The dominant lines along which the perception of reality in Pakistan is organized, and which formulate directions for the dreams, the ideals, and the lines of development of the society, follow patterns which have to be inspected in their own right" (143).

While on one level *Maps for Lost Lovers* is a "clash of civilizations" novel, in Samuel Huntington's sense, there is nevertheless a cross-examination of concepts such as traditional and modern which comes to the surface in the wake of rapid social change and the ensuing feeling of cultural vulnerability, especially within a diaspora. Referring to Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt in 1928, Friedeman Büttner explains:

al-Banna wanted a modernization of society that combined scientific technical progress according to Western patterns with a basic ethical revival from within Islamic tradition [. . .] an Islamic state in which all social areas were regulated by the spirit if not the letter of the Qur'an. If, at the same time, the West was strongly rejected, this did not refer to all modernizing incentives coming from the West. Rather, the rejection referred – similar to the Protestant fundamentalists – to the structures and values that accompanied them. (66)

In other words, the implied antagonism between traditional Islamic values and contemporary Western culture, while indeed present in some cases, cannot always explain the multifaceted relations between British and Pakistani ways of life, especially when we recall that Pakistan does possess modern institutions and habits, such as a nation-state, market economy and industry, transportation, (irregular) democratic elections and modern means of communicating and disseminating information (Werth 149, 162). It is precisely this “contact zone” – Nadia Butt uses the term to denote “the space of cultural plurality in today’s transcultural world” (155) – among and between cultures which Aslam probes in all of its convolutions. The binary “clash” formula of traditional versus progressive is revealed as a complex aggregation of competing myths, packed with variables which are negotiated differently: notions of cultural contamination and integration, Islam and the community/nation, permissible margins to question orthodoxy, altercation on the domestic level, the mediation of absolutes through cultural representations, and the next generations’ strategies for navigating the present as they look to the future.

In *Les abus de la mémoire*, Tzvetan Todorov makes the distinction between literal and exemplary memory, the first subordinating the present to the past, while the second – potentially liberating – allows the past to be exploited in the present (31-32). While the children and grandchildren, born in Britain, are generally more open to exemplary memory, it is more often the parents’ and grandparents’ memories of the past which define – and seriously constrain¹ – this close-knit Pakistani community-in-exile, ultimately tearing families apart within this microcosm of contemporary Pakistan in its fitful attempt to define itself, to answer the essential question: “To what end will we use collective memory?” Possible answers include: retreat into community, integration, a negotiated, cross-cultural position with which to negotiate modernity, or perhaps something else entirely. Werth, for example, provides observations from his fieldwork, wherein Islamic traditionalism “pays heed to such matters as science or modernity in a different way: rather than treating them as antagonistic, it incorporates them into its own realm” (147). The articulation between past and present becomes a zone of continuous present, described in the novel as traumatic events that slow down time (79-80), especially as regards all of the irrational elements that create and maintain human reality. Such temporal articulation highlights the authentic dangers when memory – including the normative, prescriptive memory of a “certain past” – has not been put to good use, provoking a conflict of cultural identities based on what Deniz Kandiyoti calls “a presumed communal past” rather than an integration of diversity in the present (378; see also Tickell 160).

Neil J. Smelser advances the following definition of cultural trauma, which will serve us well when considering the lived experience of these Pakistani immigrants in Britain:

A memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions. (44)

Although any discussion of cultural trauma regarding Pakistan must take Partition into account, more immediately relevant to *Maps for Lost Lovers* is the perceived threat to cultural referents experienced by Pakistani émigrés to Britain, especially if one accepts Marten deVries's idea (developed from Whiting and Whiting) that one of the purposes of culture is to maintain "an orderly progression through the life cycle" (*Traumatic Stress* 401). Such uprootings, Kai Erikson insists, qualify as traumatic events, "because it is *how people react to them* rather than *what they are* that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have [. . .] 'trauma' has to be understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discrete happening, from a *persisting condition* as well as from an acute event" (184-185; original italics).

Werth places this kind of psychological response within the context of modernity and globalization, highlighting the "deep unrest filling those who feel their own concepts and their identity are being twisted in the process of being attuned to a formulation of a reality which is not theirs" (145). Throughout the novel are indications that Britain is considered a hostile environment and residence in the UK is neither desired nor seen as anything but temporary, at least for the older generation.² A fundamental paradox is that cultural trauma can damage, as well as create, a sense of community, and Aslam's characters display this phenomenon, generating what Erikson (citing William Freudenburg and Timothy Jones in the context of disaster situations) calls "corrosive communities" (185-186; 189), wherein the community also seems held together by negative forces. While there is indeed a sense of community, it is a solidarity based on siege mentality, of protecting the group at all costs in the face of external threats. Perhaps this is the case, to varying degrees, in any examination of group dynamics, although it comes to the fore when the group feels vulnerable, creating what Appadurai calls an "ethnic implosion" (149), defined by Aristide Zolberg and colleagues as "primary solidarity groups vying with each other in a desperate search for security" (257). Such is the "double-edged sword" of cultural assimilation, offering protection and

a sense of belonging at the price of isolation and predatory competition (deVries 400); someone who feels safe within the ingroup asserts his / her individuality, while someone who feels threatened will do the opposite. These immigrants seek to reestablish the traditions and customs which they recognize and which contribute to their sense of identity by association through a politics of arbitrary closure, as Michael Keith and Steve Pile remind us: “These politics hermetically seal these boundaries, creating spaces of closure; on one side, ‘the goodies’ and on the other ‘the baddies’” (222), the sort of enclave mindset which hopes to guarantee a fixed notion of identity rather than consider identity as an ongoing process.

In the case of orthodox Muslims, much of this insularity could be attributed, according to Michael Cook, to the fact that Islam and the Koran have not been subjected to the same modern critique as Christianity and the Bible, or at least not to the same degree:

The Western evolution has been dominated by two phenomena, both products of the nineteenth century. The first was the emergence of the ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible: a rigorous philological approach which treats its object no differently from any other text which happens to have come down to us from the past, and reveals it as a pastiche of sources of varying dates and tendencies. The second was the phenomenon of soft belief – the willingness of large numbers of mainstream believers to give ground to this higher criticism, and the scientific outlook of which it is a part, and to be satisfied with salvaging a residual religiosity. Neither of these phenomena has been prominent in the Islamic world, and particularly not the first. (43-44)

Orthodoxy and conservatism are widespread, even normal, as a response to cultural trauma, and can indeed serve a practical purpose in terms of identification and grounding, despite obvious shortcomings, such as claims to absolute truth which, for example, place adherents above the law of the host country (see Nadia Butt, “Between Orthodoxy and Modernity” 164).

In the British city re-named Dasht-e-Tanhaii by the residents, variously translated as “wilderness of solitude” or “desert of loneliness,” these immigrants call attention to the sense of traumatic uprooting, despite the harsh conditions being left behind (*Maps for Lost Lovers* 29):

Pakistan is a poor country, a harsh and disastrously unjust land, its history a book full of sad stories, and life is a trial if not a punishment for most of the people born there: millions of its sons and daughters have managed to find

footholds all around the globe in their search for livelihood and a semblance of dignity. Roaming the planet looking for solace, they've settled in small towns that make them feel smaller still, and in cities that have tall buildings and even taller loneliness. (*Maps for Lost Lovers* 9)

Such a sense of loss, while perhaps universal among all immigrants, is not simply an internal, self-reflexive unease, but is exacerbated by external factors specific to each community-in-exile, the small towns where fitting in is often difficult, the tall buildings which lack all semblance of humanity. The question arises, however, what happens when the supporting culture fails, as it does in many respects, whether in Pakistan or in the diaspora; deVries cautions that strong identification to a culture “leads to a deeper sense of loss when the life of the culture is disrupted” (400). This leads us to ask further, as Salman Rushdie does, are these Pakistani immigrants navigating between two cultures, or have they fallen between two stools (15), what Cordula Lemke refers to as a diaspora “caught between longing and belonging,” recalling the tension between literal (or nostalgic) memory and exemplary memory cited above (172).

Following on the heels of an insular community is the conviction of purity and its attendant fear of contamination from outside, including the preoccupation with reputation on both the individual and collective levels. Nadia Butt makes the point that although separateness and purity were necessary to the mindset of a distinct state in 1947, it is “a hurdle today to the enrichment of [Pakistani] culture. It is so because the purity concern locks the culture into a watertight compartment” (*Daily Times* 1). Notions of ethnic and religious purity are insidious, so much so that “may your son marry a white woman” is a neighborhood curse within the context of diaspora described in the novel (118), and children are frightened into obedience with the threat that they will be “given away to a white person” (220). Michael O'Connor, interviewing Aslam, unwittingly throws the situation into relief along racial lines when he says “There is no integration in the novel, England, as it were, is absent,” whereas Aslam himself corrects O'Connor, saying “only the WHITE England is absent,” thus calling into question any assumed multi-ethnicity in this particular corner of Britain (1). Even the character of Shamas, who directs the Community Relations Council – “helping others to negotiate the white world” (15) – and who is the most open-minded of the older generation of Pakistanis, does not assist the immigrants to integrate white British society, but rather to confront it (see Butt 174). Shamas is at the same time considered impure, especially by his orthodox wife Kaukab, because of his affiliation with the Communist Party and “his Godless ideas” (34), as well as his habit of drinking an occasional glass of whiskey. A political program from which God is absent could not be further from

Islamic thought, and while he is respected in the community for his good heart, Shamas is nevertheless suspect for his high level of tolerance of other religions and western ideas of equality and justice (210).

For her part, Kaukab – like most of the other Pakistani women in the neighborhood – possesses a special set of clothing for going out, where she may come into contact with whites and be tainted. She removes this set of clothes immediately on returning to her house, whose interior has been painted the precise colors of their former home in Pakistan, what Appadurai refers to as “hypercompetent reproduction” in a context of nostalgia (30). Her interaction with whites is extremely limited, and while her rudimentary ability to speak English is at least partly to blame for her reticence, more pertinent is her fear of contamination; Kaukab washes after coming into contact with nonbelievers. She can literally count on one hand her annual transactions with whites: “The ‘thank you’ she murmurs to the flower-deliveryman is her third exchange with a white person this year; there were five last year; none the year before, if she remembers correctly; three the year before that” (69). Threats of contamination also exist between groups from different areas of the subcontinent, especially as regards Hindus and Sikhs in spite of their common bond as immigrants, leading one to the conclusion that such preoccupation with purity is based primarily on religion rather than race, wherein white skin in Britain is a marker of religious, rather than racial, difference.³

If even casual contact with non-Muslims provokes such a strong sense of impurity, intimate relations, such as marriage, incite even more careful scrutiny. Traditionally, marriages are arranged in this community, precisely with an eye to avoiding miscegenation. This practice is followed to the point of orchestrating a union between cousins whenever possible (see Werth 153), despite warnings on the risks of intrafamilial marriages from two local doctors – one British, one Indian – neither of whom is able to convince the orthodox Muslims:

[the father] reminded the Englishman that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were first cousins, and told the Hindu woman that before lecturing the Muslims on the dangers of genetic defects she might want to do something about her own gods who had eyes in the middle of their foreheads and what about those six-armed goddesses that were more Swiss Army knives than deities. (119)

Once again, the notion of purity seems unrelated to these Pakistanis’ situation as immigrants to Britain, as neither the British nor the Indian doctor are able to penetrate prevailing attitudes, in spite of the fallacious logic used by the father to defend his position. If suitable partners are not found within the closed ethnic community,

families will either send their offspring to Pakistan for marriage or have a potential mate sent from Pakistan, often with the assistance of a matchmaker; this is the case in the novel. Kaukab's only daughter, Mah-Jabin, is, following such orthodox tradition, also married to a man in Pakistan. This marriage has disastrous results, and she returns to Britain, although as she is no longer a virgin she is damaged goods as regards any possible future union. As is often the case, the standard for female purity is higher than the standard for men. The local prostitute, for example, is allowed to go about her business because she is white; "had she been Indian or Pakistani, she would have been assaulted and driven out of the area within days of moving in for bringing shame on her people" (16). Following this logic, when Chanda moves in with the man she loves, her brothers refer to her as a "little whore" and ultimately kill her (64). Such examples lend weight to Appadurai's argument that the "honor of women becomes [. . .] an armature of stable (if inhuman) systems of cultural reproduction" (45). Women, in other words, become the standard-bearers of men's reputations. Ironically, one of Chanda's brothers is having an affair with a Sikh woman, yet he sees no parallel between the two situations (344), the difference in religions complicating the aforementioned gender equation. In the novel, women are equated with infidels, called "minions of Satan both!" by some of the men (194), and even Suraya concludes of her gender, "*We women are wicked*" (200). A mosque cleric goes so far as to refer to women as "faeces-filled sacks," to be avoided whenever possible, with ritual bathing required after intercourse (126), and the abortion of a female fetus is considered quite normal, only becoming a tragedy for Barra (one of Chanda's brothers) when he discovers that, due to a mistaken diagnosis of its gender, his son has been aborted (349; see also 88).

While ethnic and religious purity are paramount, perhaps the greatest concern among these people is the purity of their reputations, or at least the perception of spotlessness according to custom and tradition. The importance of reputation among peoples of the subcontinent cannot be overstated by Shamas, worried as he is about the effects of a scandal on his wife: "He whom a taunt or jeer doesn't kill is probably immune to even swords" (193). The primary dramatic event of the novel is the murder of Chanda and Jugnu by the girl's brothers, an honor crime that is defended as justified and necessary by the majority of the community, even by some members of the victims' families. Butt suggests that the murder, "rather than taking up a central position in the story, acts as a mirror of the close-knit Pakistani community [. . . and] brings out transcultural anxiety among them as it eats into the vitals of their torn culture and torn society" (159-160). This murder also problematizes the notion that the younger generation is more receptive to the host country's way of life, more open to assimilation, while orthodoxy is generally attributed to the older generation. Although the brothers boast of their crime in

Pakistan, in Britain they must deny it, although everyone is reasonably sure they are guilty before they are arrested; Chanda's father is even said to be proud of what his sons have done (176). Such is the climate when honor and reputation are so highly valued that brothers will kill their sister, with their father's approval: "The neighbourhood is a place of Byzantine intrigue and emotional espionage, where when two people stop to talk on the street their tongues are like the two halves of a scissor coming together, cutting reputations and good names to shreds" (176).

Transcultural pressures also function in the opposite direction. Suraya, visiting Pakistan after having been influenced by English life, tries to intervene in a family feud involving, among other things, an uncle raping his niece; while generally her "wide-eyed innocence was found endearing and laughed off," on this occasion she is threatened with rape by the men of the family (157):

Eventually she was allowed to leave the house with her virtue intact; the men did, however, tell her that they were going to let everyone know that they *had* raped her [. . .] As it turned out it was as bad as if they had raped her. What mattered was not what you yourself knew to have actually happened, but what other people thought had happened. (158; original italics)

Kaukab too, after reproaching Chanda for living with Jugnu outside of marriage, makes it clear that she cares more about appearances than about the lovers' honest commitment (62), and she will go even further, defending the holy man against criticism, this holy man who beat a young girl to death in an effort to exorcise djinns (185-186). Even the mosque cleric guilty of pedophilia will be defended by his superiors and within the community, in the interest of preserving the reputation of the institution (245). Aslam takes pains to avoid a binary Pakistani / White or Muslim / Christian set of oppositions, however. The Christian minister of the local church is also guilty of inciting his congregation to exclude two people for conduct seen as unseemly vis à vis God's precepts (247), "thereby blaming religion in general for its intolerance and not just Islam" (Lemke 179). Of course, the hierarchy of the Catholic church has been guilty of dissimulating the conduct of pedophile priests, giving precedence to maintaining and protecting the image of the institution.⁴

Islam was the basis for the foundation of Pakistan as a country separate from India, Islam in a religious sense and as a political tool, and it remains the basis for this Pakistani community-in-exile. A fundamental problem arises, however, as Islam (much like Christianity) sees itself as applying to all humanity, whereas a nation or, on a smaller scale, a community, is never global. Nations and communities never include everyone; they are always bounded, their members

often identifying themselves not simply by those who represent “us” but also by those who are “not us,” as Anderson makes clear in defining a nation as:

an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign [. . .] The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet. (6-7; original italics)

In the case of these Pakistani immigrants in Britain, (re)-imagining or (re)-membering the community is accomplished through a sense that something has been lost along the way, a loss which, if we recall the earlier definition of cultural trauma, cannot be recovered in its original form. This leads to what Salman Rushdie, in the context of the expatriate Indian, calls the creation “of fictions [. . .] imaginary homelands” (10). Such imaginary homelands are not created equal; a homeland based on literal memory falls into nostalgia, whereas exemplary memory imagines multiple possibilities for self-fulfillment. If, as Rushdie suggests, “cultural displacement” better allows one to discern “the provisional nature of all truths,” it may also be that this same displacement is what incites the members of this Pakistani community to adhere very strictly to the tenets of Islam and its fundamental truths which are seen as anything but provisional, a safety net of sorts deployed in the interest of psychological and community cohesion (12), a strategy to limit risk by denying the possibility of multiple realities as well as overlooking the importance of imagination.

Islam, of course, is more than a religious doctrine, the Koran being very much concerned with social life, especially the law; in many ways, it is more a legal and political than a religious document (see Rushdie 380). The Koran itself states, “That is the Book, wherein is no doubt” (Q2;2, Arberry translation), whereas exegesis and interpretation, critical thinking and social intervention require an element of doubt, not to mention imagination. Rushdie argues that organizing a state around the basis of religious faith is impractical, that such a state has been “*insufficiently imagined*.” In other words, what Pakistan has been discovering, very painfully, is that no religion is any longer a sufficient basis for a society. The world has changed too much for that,” and he goes on to propose that “a State with a real reason for being” would be, for example, “a post-Islamic Pakistan” (387), less isolated, less profoundly associated with religion (see Butt 154). The contact zone of this

community-in-exile becomes a zone of friction due to the differing worldviews and ways of negotiating modernity, quite literally the different realities, expressed and experienced between believers and non-believers, which seem impossible to bring together, recalling Appadurai's disclaimer that: "One man's imagined community is another man's political prison" (32). They are often strangers to one another, incapable of mutual understanding, and while this phenomenon is certainly present at the level of nation and of community, on an even more intimate scale the effects are most felt at the level of the family, often between the first generation and their memories of traditional Pakistan and their children. Both generations, of course, see for themselves that other lifestyles can and do compete with those of the parents, but they deal with the situation differently, and not always along generational lines (117).

The family is, without doubt, the basic collectivity wherein the most vital socialization takes place, where culture is reproduced, and where reference points are fixed (Appadurai 43-44); in the context of fundamentalism and diaspora, increased mobility, liberal thinking and moral permissiveness are interpreted as "signs of moral decay" and ultimately lead to the dissolution of the family (see Büttner 59). Kaukab, the novel's matriarch and the most orthodox – not to say the most racist – among them, dutifully recites the Koran every day, without understanding a word of Arabic (322), while as we've said her husband Shamas leans toward godless communism and mutual tolerance: "He is not a believer, so he knows that the universe is without saviours: the surface of the earth is a great shroud whose dead will not be resurrected" (20). Vernacular versions of the Koran are never considered standard; Allah's truth, Anderson reminds us, is only transmitted in the "truth-language" of Arabic (14), an injunction which Kaukab observes to the letter, while Shamas, for his part, reads the newspapers every day. These newspapers, according to Hegel, are the modern man's substitute for morning prayers (see Anderson 35). Indeed, they form an odd couple – conversation between them is "frequently another way of being alone" (156) – especially in the eyes of their children, as the differing ways of negotiating modernity take their heaviest toll on the domestic level, tearing families apart in the best of times, and in the worst of times resulting in suicide and murder. Such separation of people and families is not necessarily a function of immigration, but is detailed historically within the broader context of family and cultural trauma in the novel. For example, the dissimulated Hindu ancestry of Shamas's father; he was the victim of a British bomb in 1919 in the Punjab, "which had emptied his mind of all its contents" (53) when he was ten years old, or the Sikh woman Kiran, who thirty years earlier wanted to marry Kaukab's Muslim brother, a union refused by the man's family (7).

Three families, linked to one another in this community-in-exile, seem especially important to mention. Firstly, Suraya, who is living in Britain after her drunken husband pronounced *talaaq* three times, thus divorcing her (159); she must now find another man to marry her briefly so that she can re-marry her husband and recuperate her son in Pakistan. Her efforts focus on Shamas who, as a Muslim, is allowed more than one wife. Suraya is both a devout Muslim and adapted to British life, and her position between the two allows her to interrogate the status of women within Islam:

Allah is not being equally compassionate towards the poor woman who is having to go through another marriage through no fault of her own is a thought that has occasionally crossed Suraya's mind, along with It's as though Allah forgot there were women in the world when he made some of his laws, thinking only of men – but she has banished these thoughts as all good Muslims must. (150; original italics)

Although Suraya seems more open-minded than many of the others, even some of the orthodox women have moments when they too question the status quo and the things that go without saying. Chanda's mother, for example, admits privately to her husband, "May Allah forgive me, but I've even caught myself thinking it was unimportant that [Chanda and Jugnu] were living in sin, so what if it goes against His law, that if I could do it all again I wouldn't break all ties with her over this matter" (173; see Butt 160 as well).

These are of course the afterthoughts and regrets of a mother whose daughter has been murdered and whose sons are in prison for the crime; the realization that she gave birth to both the victim and the killers weighs heavily on her mind (276). As has been mentioned, there are two competing realities regarding justice, best highlighted by the judge's comments at the end of the brothers' trial and by Shamas's thoughts to himself:

[Shamas] heard the judge say that the killers had found a cure to their problem through an immoral, indefensible act; a cure, a remedy – and their religion and background took care of the bitter aftertaste. Their religion and background assured them that, yes, they were murderers but that they had murdered only sinners. The judge said that Chanda and Jugnu had done nothing illegal in deciding to live together but, Shamas knows, that the two brothers feel that the fact that an act is legal does not mean it's right. (278; original italics)

The brothers feel justified, of course, because they have relied on literal memory in applying the kind of severe punishment which is practiced in Pakistan, that “wife-murdering” country (226) where hundreds of “honour killings” take place every year (273); Anderson argues that the ultimate sacrifice – a person willing to kill or be killed – “comes only with an idea of purity, through fatality,” an emotional response which places the social actor above the more rational idea of blind justice (144). Asked by someone in Pakistan who knows the truth, “You preferred being murderers to being the brothers of a sister who was living in sin?”, the brothers reply “Yes [. . .] because it was we who made the choice to be murderers. We are men but she reduced us to eunuch bystanders by not paying attention to our wishes” (342). This is the philosophy of justice which has been transposed to their current community, leading Shamas to comment on the social relativity of justice: “They have become a bloody Rorschach blot: different people see different things in what has happened” (137; see 43, 347 in the novel as well). Their crime of honor will of course land them in prison, but given the violent conditions – one of the brothers is seriously beaten – they risk death, too; ironically, the boys’ parents will appeal to Shamas for help with a transfer to a less-violent prison, a request to which he agrees, thus helping to ease the suffering of the men who killed his brother.

Shamas and Kaukab will also see their family destroyed as a result of these same competing philosophies regarding how best to navigate modernity. These views are summed up by their youngest son Ujala, who fled the family home eight years ago as a way of escaping both his mother’s nostalgia and his father’s idealism, in other words their mutual neglect of the here and now:

There couldn’t have been a more dangerous union than you two: *you* [Kaukab] were too busy longing for the world and the time your grandparents came from, they and their sayings and principles; and *he* [Shamas] was too busy daydreaming about the world and the time his grandchildren were to inherit. What about your responsibilities to the people who were around you here in the present? (324)

Indeed, Lemke suggests that although the three children will break free of the family, they will bear scars (180), perhaps as a result of “the politics of representing a family as normal (particularly for the young) to neighbors and peers in the new locale” (Appadurai 44). The oldest son Charag will marry Stella, a white woman (34), ultimately undergoing a vasectomy, which his mother qualifies as a “Christian conspiracy to stop the number of Muslims from increasing” (57; 59). Mah-Jabin, for her part, was married in Pakistan but returned to Britain to escape her husband’s brutality, a truth Kaukab will discover later (306), after she has already judged the

girl, trapped as the older woman is “within the cage of permitted thinking” (110), interpreting any sign of rebellion in her children as evidence of contamination by outsiders (Lemke 178). She beats, and very nearly kills, her daughter during an argument over the conduct of her life; Mah-Jabin then reproaches her mother for “your laws and codes, the so-called traditions that you have dragged into this country with you like shit on your shoes” (114), and who dreams of returning to the past in order to change her current situation: “I want to go back into the past and tell that young girl who was me – and whom I love – what not to do” (115).

The youngest son, Ujala, uses his homecoming to vent a long list of his complaints against his mother’s traditions, still angered by his mother “poisoning” him with bromide during his turbulent adolescence, a “blessed and consecrated salt” prescribed by the mosque cleric who understood perfectly the drug’s calming effects on libido (304). For her part, Kaukab blames her husband Shamas for planting Satan’s seed (329), and when she is forced to understand how her children feel about her, she prepares a suicide attempt from which Shamas saves her (328), although he will die – perhaps by his own hand, perhaps murdered – shortly afterward (368). For people like Kaukab, Appadurai argues, “social life was largely inertial [. . .] traditions provided a relatively finite set of possible lives, and [. . .] fantasy and imagination were residual practices” (53), whereas the younger generation has grown up not simply wishing to assimilate, but seeking to belong within the considerably more complex “interactive ethnoscapas” (48). In other words, the parents’ memories do not correspond at all to their children’s lived experience, meaning that the parents’ cultural map, created out of a traumatic past and clung to out of a sense of familiarity and security, has in fact done a great deal of harm to their children, which explains the parents’ abject, suicidal loss of hope at the end of the novel.

But hope there is, hope to challenge absolutes through artistic and cultural expression; rather than providing the answers of a religious or a political ideology, literature and other forms of artistic expression are “an inquiry; great literature, by asking extraordinary questions, opens new doors in our minds” (Rushdie 423). Early in the novel, it is jazz music that brings people together, whatever their gender, religion or age, reducing the distance between people(s) by insisting on their status as human beings:

The record would begin and soon the listeners would be engrossed by those musicians who seemed to know how to blend together all that life contains, the real truth, the undeniable last word, the innermost core of all that is unbearably painful within a heart and all that is joyful, all that is loved and all that is worthy of love but remains unloved, lied to and lied

about, the unimaginable depths of the soul where no other can withstand the longings and which few have the conviction to plumb, the sorrows and the indisputable rage – so engrossed would the listeners become that, by the end of the piece, the space between them would have contracted, heads leaning together as though they were sharing a mirror. All great artists know that part of their task is to light up the distance between two human beings. (13)

Lemke too, citing Ines Weinrich, underscores the role of jazz as a cultural bridge, saying, “On the one hand, jazz musicians point to a successful way of asserting one’s own culture within a foreign environment, and on the other hand, the use of elements of jazz in traditional Asian music has been practiced by Muslim musicians for a considerable time and stands for integration” (176)⁵. Even indigenous forms of music are allowed greater latitude in voicing unorthodox points of view, as the widely-attended concert by Nusrat illustrates; his lyrics tell the story of a young woman forced into marriage with a man she doesn’t love, and his lyrics also valorize a mystical communion with Allah, having no need of clerical intervention, and wherein women “—more than the men, attempt to make a new world” (192).

Charag also takes up the challenge. An artist like his father, he has purchased old photos of the neighborhood residents, old photographs destined for the trash bin, and hopes to incorporate them into his paintings, thus making the link between art and “real” people (319), while opening the photograph to various interpretations. Although a photograph is always past, “photography does *not* dam up what happens next, before, or after the photograph – everything that is conjectured and surmised in implicit accordance with the Heraclitean model of time-as-river and its modern adaptation as the *longue durée*. Instead, it exposes it to the viewer as only one of several possible ways of seeing the world” (Ulrich Baer 7). In addition to being open to various interpretations, the photographs also seem to offer, at least in part, an answer to Büttner’s question regarding how much of the past to rescue: “how much continuity is necessary in order to uphold the substance of the society? What is to be changed, what preserved, what is to be restored?” (71). The answer, implicit in the way the question is asked, is that the past is flexible and can be negotiated; it is not an all-or-nothing affair. Charag has also recently had a painting published in the Sunday paper, *The Uncut Self-Portrait*, of himself, naked and uncircumcised, as a statement against the first violence performed for cultural or religious reasons (320). While he apologizes to his mother for offending her sensibilities, he also says, “I can’t paint with handcuffs on [. . .] Jugnu taught me that we should try to break away from all the bonds and ties that manipulative groups have thought up for their own advantage. Surely, mother, you can see the merit of that” (320-321).

In fact, his mother can see no merit in that whatsoever, even though the

aforementioned “manipulative groups” include much more than orthodox Islam. His father, on the contrary, is bursting with pride, becoming aware that Charag “is maturing as an artist,” and more importantly, “becoming aware of his responsibilities as an artist” as he recalls verses which insist on just such social obligation: “*Which to hold dearer: my love for you, or the sorrows of others in the world? They say the intoxication is greater when two kinds of wine are mixed.* Good artists know that society is worth representing too” (319-320; original italics). Challenging absolutes through artistic inquiry is a way of opening what Butt calls “the singular space of Islam” to a multiplicity of “cultural encounters” (166).

In the novel, one scene stands out in particular regarding such open-mindedness, when Shamas and a friend cross paths with some late night revelers, and their differing reactions:

It was Sunday and a small group of Saturday-night revelers – young white men and women – had come down the road, smelling of alcohol, hair and clothing awry, on their way back to their homes from some late party. [. . .] The look of distaste – revulsion – on Poorab-ji’s face had surprised and disappointed Shamas. No doubt Poorab-ji had just seen sordid promiscuity on display, debauchery, lewdness, whereas for Shamas there was hardly anything more beautiful than those young people, fumbling their way through life, full of new doubts and certainties... (144)

Rushdie lines up squarely behind Shamas, saying that the way forward is through “arguing and challenging and questioning and saying the unsayable,” what he calls “the argument between the monk and the roaring boy,” which must continue if humanity is to make genuine progress, away from the clash of cultures and toward the bridging of cultures (394-395), away from the absolutes and certitudes of fixed cultural identity and toward an identity which does not retreat from flexibility and negotiation. The contact zone must remain flexible if our goal is to make cultural mobility and integration less traumatic, where belonging does not come at the price of isolation, and where negotiating modernity does not imply a loss of fundamental values.

Notes:

¹ “Set in a postmodernist world of determining structures, the novel explores how the laws of Islam shape the lives of lovers and murderers alike. [. . .] The only

characters who sincerely mourn their loss are those who are themselves on the margins and in the cross-fire” (Lemke 171-172).

² To give just a partial list of examples: “years of exile and banishment” (6); “We should never have come to this deplorable country, sister-ji, this nest of devilry from where God has been exiled. No, not exiled – denied and slain” (30); “*England* is abroad; Bangladesh is *home*” (46; original italics); “this isn’t our country” (79); “seen only as temporary accommodation in a country never thought of as home” (96).

³ Indeed, Lemke (176) suggests that the Sikhs and Hindus are perceived by the Muslims as a greater menace to the integrity of this community than the whites, as though whites are so far beyond the pale as to be considered irrelevant – recall Aslam’s earlier assertion that white England is absent.

⁴ See “Irish priest’s sex abuse covered up.” *International Herald Tribune*. Friday 27 November 2009, page 3, and “Un rapport accuse l’Eglise catholique d’avoir couvert des abus sexuels.” *Le Monde*. Samedi 28 novembre 2009, page 8, for recent examples.

⁵ Jackie Assayag, citing Eric Hobsbawm, calls jazz a music of protest and rebellion within a mistreated minority diaspora. See Assayag, “La mondialisation des sciences sociales,” Paris: Téraèdre, 2010, pages 137-138. See also Francis Newton (Eric Hobsbawm’s pseudonym), « Une sociologie du Jazz, » Paris: Flammarion, 1966.

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