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Abstract

Writing within the sonic register of a soundtrack that plundered the diasporic mind-set of a certain “London” massive, Hanif Kureishi was widely criticized for his contribution as writer to two films in the 1980s: *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). Less lyrically perhaps—and less filmic—Salman Rushdie’s book *The Satanic Verses* was famously set on fire in Bradford in 1989. Antiracist sexualities, street riots, and book burnings were taken to mark the mobilization of a diverse and complicated British Asian presence on the streets of the United Kingdom. The point that interests the author here is the reconfiguration of the streetscape of diaspora and terror in the years since these films and the burning of the book. Burning streets and books (not particularly good in themselves) are replaced with a more virulent racial profiling in contemporary times—a constant anxiety about and accusations against Muslims (and by extension all British Asians), who are made uncomfortable at best, bombed into democracy elsewhere.

Keywords

street, queer, riot, British Asian, book burning, Kureishi, Rushdie

Book burning is something close to the heart of novelist Salman Rushdie, whose work, *The Satanic Verses* was famously burnt in Bradford more than 20 years ago, in 1989 (and in India 6 months earlier). The Bradford protest was said by many commentators to mark the public articulation and mobilization of a specifically Muslim South Asian presence on the streets of the United Kingdom (see Malik, 2009). There is much scholarship on this theme and the changes it brought: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak long ago pointed out how “the Rushdie affair has been coded as Freedom of Speech versus Terrorism” (Spivak, 1993, p. 237). With a long history, the public burning of books of course agitated the liberal sensitivities of many commentators, some of whom were later all in favor of the bombing of Baghdad, including, presumably the destruction of various libraries, museums, and bookshops. This is not to excuse death threats on novelists, nor do I want to enter into the debates about censorship or appropriate handling of Islamic narrative (the wives of the Prophet as prostitutes was always going to get Rushdie into trouble, as his sales publicist no doubt knew, but horribly underestimated. Rushdie himself

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insists he did not intend to offend, as we shall see). In this article, I want to think through the reconfiguration of the streetscape of diaspora and terror that this book burning achieved. Or rather, to examine how the incendiary street politics of the late 1980s prefigures, and yet is rather different from, the street politics of today. The book-burning “stunt” has strangely lost its innocence. It is now a terrorist outrage and prophecy as it reconfigures and then changes shape—as Rushdie’s characters also do—in the furnace of geopolitical intrigues. What we might see is a morphing of an identity politics that now seems dated, and changed, so that the street scene invests these characters and issues with darker sentiments played out in suburban space.

I think it is useful to think about these issues through the prism of two other “texts” almost contemporary but predating Rushdie’s satanic versifying. The films *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears, 1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Frears, 1987), both written by Hanif Kureishi, invoke street politics in South London—where we will see burning cars and demonstrators fighting the police, riots, tenements in flames—in scenes that now look dated and yet prophetic. I think this has significance for how we think of terror and security today, where, even in quiet times, there prevails a more persistent everyday anxiety about terror alerts and racial profiling in a surveillance state. Where Spivak attends to a geographic and linguistic “really existing” Asia¹ that has now become the major location for the sharp end of the war on terror, we must recognize that this is an Asia as if filtered through U.S. foreign policy, and it should not be imagined *only* as a theatre of war. Spivak’s (2008) effort is to “provide exercises for imagining pluralized Asias” (p. 2). Alongside these Asias, insofar as there are several already, there can also be the multiple and varied globalized versionings that will extend possibilities. The trouble is that being Asian in Britain (or on the streets of other big cities, such as New York) has lost the plurality that some had once had fought so hard to establish (and which in other circumstances would be by now the “normal” plurality of settlement). Instead, the war at home (Homeland Security, UK Border Agency, Moderate Muslims, etc.) has managed to transmute multiplicity into stereotype. The work of Gayatri Spivak makes it possible to read another Gayatri—Gayatri Gopinath—alongside the critical thinking of Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad, in a way that can, I suggest, return us to the films of Kureishi and Frears, and the novel of Rushdie, so as to reclaim a critique of stereotyping that is a necessary corrective to the current reaction.

Unfortunately, it may be now the case that we must also talk of an expanded, reconfigured diasporic Asia as host for another theatre of the same war of terror that codifies really-existing Asia as crisis in the global imaginary. This diasporic Asia as war zone becomes a matter of everyday low-intensity urban/street conflict, in locations such as London, Manchester, Bradford, Birmingham, and New York, and so on. One argument of this article then is that as we move away (in time and outlook) from the difficult multivariuous ambiguity of Rushdie’s novel and Kureishi’s cinema, the convoluted, complicated engagement and contestation of identity that we see fought out on the streets of these texts (in Thatcher-era Lewisham, London, etc.) recedes. Diasporic British-Asia, and the visibility of “British Asians,” loses depth and gains a perverse specificity through being embodied in the figure of the threatening Muslim: The people of the book have become book burners and Jihadis, and do duty for all Asians in a popular imagination run riot. Various commentators do not seem to agree on how this came to pass or what should be the response, but clearly there are also multiple and varied globalized versionings of terror and multiple ways to resist, and the specificities should not be erased.

Dirty Laundry in Public

What is there new to say about the old controversies? *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Kureishi, 1996) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Kureishi, 1988), with their self-consciously “postcolonial” politics, are now inextricably mired in an “identity debate,” which they perhaps should have by

now outgrown. Like Rushdie's (1998/2006) *The Satanic Verses*, these films cannot be read without reference to the difficult politics of South Asians and Islam in Britain even as we might sometimes want this not to color every reading and every pronouncement on diaspora. In the to-be-restored archive of British Asian cinema these films and texts are touch papers for recent times, even—and perhaps exactly—where today they seem dated. In an early scene in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Sammy and his father Rafi are returning home after witnessing street rioting, petrol bombings, conflagration, and chaos in the inner city. Sammy turns a corner a little ahead of his father and begins to shout: "For fucks fucking fucks sake fuck it." His father worries about his son's language and bad education ("that I paid through my arse to get you") but Sammy is more concerned that the street rebels have overturned and burnt his car. Sammy's pompously knowing discourse on urban vitality is doused in personal commodity dispossession, mediated by sexual expletive. We will see more of this scene, which layers a kind of comedy over a kind of violence.

The sexual politics of Kureishi's fiction stresses ambiguity. In her book on queer Asian diasporic cultural production and politics, *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath begins with the scene from Kureishi's earlier film. In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Johnny and Omar's backroom caress "unbuttons" an "erotics of power." For Johnny, "sex with Omar is a way of tacitly acknowledging and erasing" a racist past, but for Omar, "queer desire is precisely what allows him to remember" rather than "succumb" and give in "to the historical amnesia that wipes out the legacies of Britain's racist past" (Gopinath, 2005, p. 2). In 1985 and throughout the 1990s, this scene continued to raise problems among the left (and no doubt the far right!), some of whom found it difficult to reconcile Kureishi's up-front (shirt-front, brown shirt, national front) provocation with recognition of the "barely submerged" histories of colonialism and racism that the film also depicts. "We did not fuck fascists, we fucked them up" insists one activist friend, with somewhat surprising aggression. My feeling is that the sort of provocation Kureishi achieves in *Laundrette* is far less provocative today—indeed, in Kureishi's 2008 novel *Something to Tell You* (p. 159), Omar reappears as a Blair-appointed Lord of Parliament, drunk and on his knees in the toilet of a working-class pub (more below). Of course there are always fascists caught in their own vicious contradictions who find guilty pleasures through which to articulate their incoherence, and they found willing partners in the likes of Omar, with motives and desires all too neatly beyond censure. But even if the flash point of this debate has past, the suggestion Gopinath (2005) makes about memory deserves attention: "Queer desire does not transcend or remain peripheral to these histories [of colonialism and racism] but instead it becomes central to their telling and remembering" (p. 2). Omar interrupts Johnny's caress to remember, remind, and accuse him of his racist connections, of his having been seen marching in the street with the National Front. At this point Kureishi is also asking the question of Omar, and fucking fascists is not all that is at stake.

Queer

One problem that emerges alongside Gopinath's (2005) otherwise important arguments is that the rendering of diaspora is perhaps overplayed as a "conservative imaginary" with a "peculiar" and "backward-looking" "relation to the past" (p. 3). The reference here is to Stuart Hall, but Hall does not tarnish all those in diaspora with the same conservative brush. It is worth adding a caution when Gopinath (2005) asserts that "in the queer diasporic texts" she examines, "queer desire reorients the traditionally backward-looking glance of diaspora" (p. 3). Certainly her work evokes a useful contrast to those who present "myths of purity and origin that seamlessly lend themselves to nationalist projects" and to those who support Hindutva and Hindu nationalism abroad; and of course, it is true that a complicit diaspora can articulate quite well with

“processes of transnational capitalism and globalization” (p. 7). The caution to introduce here would be that attributing reorientations to “queer desire” allows a slippage that can be sustained only if the radical antiracist anti-imperialist, and communist progressive “parts” of diaspora, historically quite important, are also gathered under the label “queer.” I would be sympathetic to this idea (Kureishi as queer is plausible, Rushdie less so), but complicity has a variety of forms. A further problem with an extension of the terminology of queer to include all parts of a radical diasporic sensibility would be that not all those so gathered together would necessarily want to march, for example, in the India Day parade in New York today, or at least not without considerable debate over the idea of nation thus celebrated.

Consider those whom Biju Mathew writes about in his engaging book *Taxi!* (2005) where he makes the point that in present-day New York City, the “politics of community representation evolved out of the basic symbolic material of social justice activists” (Mathew 2005, p. 192). The universalism of the civil rights struggle morphed dialectically over time into “the particular right to mark difference” in the “framework of multiculturalism,” itself breaking down into a “separation of communities,” with “each” producing its own institutions, priorities, and campaigns (p. 192). This is called an “inward-looking, self dividing politics” (p. 193), but the burden of Mathew’s book is to note alliances across differences are still very much a part of the politics of diaspora today. Similarly, Vijay Prashad’s (2001, p. 67) outstanding work *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* adds several other transnational left dimensions in reporting the “council” meeting of Marcus Garvey with the Gandhian Haridas T. Mazumdar and a certain Nguyễn Ái Quốc, later known as Ho Chi Minh (see also Prashad’s, 2000, p. 173, *The Karma of Brown Folk*). In *Kung Fu Fighting*, Prashad argues that “polyculturalist” claims of cultural belonging offer “solace,” but implicitly acknowledge a defensive trap that is “able only to garner crumbs from the racist table” (p. 68). Instead, a broad antiracist platform that retains the idea of cultural difference, does “not abdicate the right to adjudicate between different practices in struggle,” and fights to “dismantle and redistribute unequal resources and racist structures” (p. 69).

Certainly the grounds of alliance are present with Gopinath in an opposition to what she condemns as “an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history” and where the “violences of multiple uprootings, displacements and exiles” are remembered in her focus on the queer body (2005, p. 4). Yet it is important that contestation and transformation of racist and colonial histories occur through a range of very present, diverse, but often also submerged, alternative practices of diaspora, and the varieties of opposition, intervention, reorientation, and resistance should not be left unacknowledged or displaced by the urgency of other necessary recognitions. The work of Mathew and Prashad establish lines of inquiry that can be extended—for example, South Asian communists in Britain also have a long and proud tradition of antiracist, anti-imperialist struggle that is neither conservative nor backward-looking, nor can study of this important tradition be dismissed with vague repetition of a refrain that suggests that Marxist analyses inevitably “run the risk of replicating” a totalizing framework (Gopinath, 2005, p. 38). There is no total schema, but to use fear of one to erase communist, antiracist history would be an error, and to recover and extend the multiplicity of oppositional movements is always a worthwhile project, undertaken critically.

Tania

In her extensively detailed study of South Asian women in Britain, Amrit Wilson (2006) notes that there was both “an ever-present undercurrent of resistance from women” against patriarchal oppression within South Asian families and within the wider society and also “a plethora of superstitions, fears and taboos [that] served to stigmatise female sexuality” (p. 11). Wilson rounds upon attitudes to sexuality and staple controversies such as izzat, arranged marriages,

illicit and “mixed” relationships, parental discipline, the hijab, work and religion to present a considered and convoluted, even dialectical, picture of the ways women in Britain are neither fully free of patriarchy, nor simply “victims” without a strong tradition of struggle, including against the colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism which has “shaped and reshaped” (Wilson, 2006) social relations.

Gopinath’s reading of the disappearance of Tania at the end of *My Beautiful Laundrette* is a brilliant critique of the limits of Kureishi’s “filmic universe.” That we do not know if Tania throws herself on the tracks, or leaves on the train “to seek a presumably freer elsewhere,” provocatively suggests the potentials of moving beyond the normative female diasporic subjectivity figured as “vanishing point” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 4). Victimhood and flight are not the only options, as we might glean from another scene from Kureishi’s late 1980s work. Two years after *Laundrette*, we find the lesbian characters Vivia and Rani performing for the male gaze of the patriarchal father, Rafi, in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*. It might be argued, in identitarian terms, that these two do not move very far beyond the ambiguous marking of Tania, even with their aggressive, performative, queer visibility designed to shock Sammy’s father. A critical leftist reading will observe that they are crucially important as harbingers of Rafi’s doom. Spivak (1993) notes that this is “not a subplot, their function is crucial” (p. 249) as their researched political intervention offers a more nuanced and informed (bilingual) characterization of Rafi’s impotently faded power as a returned corrupt former government figure. Here the ghosting of torture and terror in the postcolonial elite’s betrayal of the promise of independence struggles says much more than Kureishi’s (bad-) boy’s-own view of (black) lesbian-display, even as it does not displace the cliché of the clinch. Of course a scenario like this could plausibly happen (despite denials), but that it happens in the film in just this “controversial” way says as much about stereotypes of sexuality as it does anything necessary to the plot. Dutifully acknowledged, the plot then thickens when Rosie’s sexual experiments with cross-dressing Victoria manifest alongside the colonial era romance of Rafi and Alice, and the loft-living liaison of Sammy and Anna are portrayed in the justifiably famous Bollywood-style triple-horizontal-split-screen sex shot.

Urban Perspectives

What strikes me as strange now, watching that sequence again, is how well the horizontal frame of the screen suits the filmic version of Thatcherite London. Flat, low-rise, oppressive London—life lived under the weight of the overpass that covers the community squatter-camp where Victoria lives, and which is bulldozed even flatter by the end. This leveling of space was also one of the framing first moves of the film; street rioting and flames decorate the opening sections. Rows of houses burning in the riot-torn streets of Brixton, Peckham, Lewisham, and New Cross are glossed in *Sammy and Rosie* as if they merely offered a panoramic backdrop to the entertaining explanation Sammy offers to his father about being a Londoner. Yet the film had begun with a tribute to the police or immigration squad persecution of settled Londoners and the death of a woman who had been protecting her son from arrest. Kureishi was writing after the deaths of Cherry Groce and Cynthia Jarrett, killed by police (see the film *Injustice*, Fero & Mehmood, 2001, for a commentary on deaths in custody). There are vigils, protest, and escalating tension. The street contestation as presented in this perspective is also horizontal; the police enter from the right, the protesters surge from the left. A fire engine is attacked, a fancy-dress group of busker musicians move in colorful single file among the crowds. The riot is not a riot but a carnival, the police retreat. Choreographed street fighting is perhaps not always the first perspective that contemporary sociology would bring to bear on a city like London. While I think the presentation owes a great deal to Kureishi’s sentimental, and participatory, attachment to the metropolis of his birth, many years later the riots and the Thatcherite ambience (intentionally, ironically, grim upper lip) look like repetition.

A different view of London is offered by Rushdie in the opening pages of *The Satanic Verses*, where the British Asian, Asian British mixed-up, muddled-up, transformed, and hybridized characters Farishta and Chamcha fall from the sky after a bomb goes off in their plane. Against this vertical trauma, Kureishi has Sammy and Anna, Rosie and Victoria, Rafi and Alice all lie together in cross-race, but heteronormative, embrace. In his informative book on Kureishi, Bart Moore-Gilbert (2001) says that the author “anatomises the quasi-colonial attitudes, institutional structures and social hierarchies which subordinate minorities within contemporary British society” (p. 3), but it is also possible to feel that the split-screen sex scene flattens what might have been a radical orientation to urban living. A racial radicalism masquerades as shock in a predictable algebraic formation, even as *Sammy and Rosie* raises the spectre of postcolonial violence alongside, or perhaps displaced by, the emergent neoliberal opportunism of Thatcher’s deindustrializing, neocolonial, little-racist, god-save-the-queen, jingoistic, union-jack Britain.

Rafi’s nostalgia for Britain’s colonial grandeur runs to having his toast all buttery and “cunty fingers.” Just what this is remains obscure enough to leave at least one innocent colonial migrant in the dark: A kind of a crumpet perhaps? The point is that Rafi’s England of yore is not prim and proper, but embraces Alice in a wonderland plateau of nostalgic desire. As Moore-Gilbert (2001) reminds us, “some critics have followed Spivak’s lead” in ascribing a “multi-perspectival point of view” in the “triple-fuck” scene to “Kureishi’s desire . . . to produce a more ‘collective’ mode of representation, in which the polyphony of narrative points of view reflect the film’s pluralistic and democratic social vision” (p. 95). Although this framing is director Stephen Frears’ filmic signature, I am nevertheless inclined to agree with Spivak.

The American journalist Anna in *Sammy and Rosie* takes a great number of photographs during the rioting. It is with her in mind that Gopinath’s queer warnings can be taken as a corrective supplement to the stark anti-Thatcherism of the film and not just a sectarian insistence that “my issue is the main issue.” The salient point being that it might also be good to try today—as Kureishi perhaps does in *Sammy and Rosie*—to reorient the perspectives that frame multicultural encounters in the city, so to speak. This is to locate the settler in the city, already involved, even if American. The assumption with which to break here, the complacency that needs to be challenged, is the idea that at ground level there is chaos. The photographer takes still shots and gets actors to pose among the rubble. Windows are smashed, there are flames in the upper stories of the houses, sirens wail, but there is a degree of intentionality, and community. Everyone knows when to run. The street photographer is as much at home among the ambiguities of the urban as any of the other characters, as any of the Londoners. Then, at least. Sadly, perhaps no longer with the same strategic optimism.

Street Writing

The narrative of *Sammy and Rosie* takes us through the streetscape menagerie of Sammy and Rosie’s social acquaintances, some of whom are sexual partners, some of whom are more interesting and colorful. In one scene, Rosie explains her thesis study on the varieties of kissing—a kind of cod-anthropology humor on Kureishi’s part, again referencing his peculiarly conflicted concerns about intimacy. Rosie was described by Gayatri Spivak as the best hope we have. I also agree, but . . .

In *Sammy and Rosie*, the street riots are described by Sammy, quoting Rosie, as “an affirmation of the human spirit.” Rafi scoffs somewhat. Rey Chow (2002) suggests that we need to rethink the culture of protest and its relation to a work ethic that belongs to modern secular capitalism. The game of street protest as representational politics, vying for a space on the spectacular news hour, forcing a minister to comment is something like a chore or a vocation—not necessarily in the most righteous sense. Do those who protest by the numbers (like the 2 million who marched against the Blair/Bush doctrine in February 2003) do so with the reflective critical

awareness of what might be the best strategic response to the coercive and co-opting powers of capital, or is this too complicity? Scripted again, visible as part of a drama.

Perhaps with Rosie in mind, Chow (2002) writes,

As long as minorities' rights to speak and to be are derived from and vested in the enabling power of liberalism, and as long as these minorities are clearly subordinate to their white sponsors, things tend to remain unproblematic for the latter. Should the reality of this power relation be exposed and its hierarchical structure be questioned, however, violence of one kind or another usually erupts, and naked forms of white racist backlash quickly reassert themselves (p. ix).

Rosie is never obviously troubled by the violence on the streets. Her pathos is in the death of the old White man in his bath in the council flats. The arrival of Sammy's father Rafi, which both offers and threatens to transform Sammy's previously inconsequential existence into one that promises money and power (however corrupt) also changes the comfortable dynamic over which Rosie rules. She goes out and seduces Victoria, demanding Sammy accept their polyamorous arrangement. Sammy, at least not insisting on monogamy, still enacts a fantasy of retribution in the loft with Anna. Liberalism here is the syncopated flip side of White supremacy, as a propertyed ownership of representational space. Rosie is writing a thesis; Sammy is an accountant, writing the ledgers of commerce. Liberalism implicates well-intentioned "progressive" politics in an everyday violence that references and is underpinned by racism, economic privilege, and brute force. The bulldozers move the alternative squatter-musician camp from beneath the fly-over (under the modernist overpass) and yet Rosie continues to be lauded as the center of her world. That there are other political options in this scenario must be seen as a matter of urgency.

Rosie

More than 25 years after the Miners' Strike, Thatcherism, and the advent of neoliberalism, it might now read as (sadly) normal that *Sammy and Rosie* evidences a surprising absence of Reds. No communists and not even socialists of the newspaper-wielding Trotskyite variety have any major role. At best, an anti-National Front poster. The approval of Rosie as the best hope has to be understood alongside this exclusion.

Spivak notes that Rosie is in a "beleaguered position" and says "you cannot really be against Rosie . . . she loves all the right people. She's a white heterosexual woman who loves lesbians, loves blacks, is in an interracial marriage, etc, etc." Yet Rosie has "no final determination" (Spivak, 1993, p. 245). Thus, although she is the most tolerant of all characters, and her guidance is love, or at least pleasure, she somehow cannot be left like that. I want to approve all this but am chastened by Chow (2002) who reminds us that "tolerance remains cathected to advantage" (p. 13), such that the notion of "neo-racism" (Balibar, 1991, p. 21) manifests in "anthropological culturalism" as "inherent" to an "expansionist logic" and accelerating "racial and ethnicist violence" (Chow, 2002, p. 14). I am reminded of how Sammy is cathected to his car as its destruction undoes his allegiance to the street protests, and cements instead his filial investment in his father's dubious wealth. On the other hand, Rosie is something like the other-loving anthropologist who, despite the very best intentions and declarations of fidelity to, at least, ideals of diversity and equality, still manages to have her chocolate cake and eat it too. There is little good to be said for what Chow calls "well intentioned disaffiliations from overt racist practices" if professions of concern by those who scrupulously will not "speak for others" (e.g., by leaving post-colonial theory to people of color) coincide with the claims of those who would help in a charitable hidden vanguardist role. These moves "often end up reconstituting and reinvesting racism in a different guise" (Chow, 2002, p. 17).

Rafi

In *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), Spivak identified the postcolonial figure of Rafi as the one who betrayed anticolonial struggles in the crucible of a new elite realpolitik and neocolonial restitution of global power. This film from long ago can give us materials to think through problems and inform us of historical contexts: The role models in *Sammy and Rosie* are themselves mediators of entire sociopolitical networks—Rosie (White guilt, best we can hope for), Sammy (identitarian narcissism), Victoria (sexual ambiguity/narcissism), Anna (display as photographer, with two Ws tattooed on her buttocks), Rafi (postcolonial betrayal, exposed), Vivia and Rani (activist lesbian commitment and “fact-finding,” Spivak, 1993, p. 249), while the taxi driver (as damaged naxalite—the betrayal of the progressive politics) seems the key critical—and significantly ghostly, haunting—vector of the film. I do not want to lament a lost complexity, but perhaps these characters open up possibilities for discussion of political diagnostics of the present time. Sammy in particular: To his father’s question as they negotiate the burning streets: “Why do you live in a war zone?” Sammy replies, with an assertion of urban pride, “We’re not British, we are Londoners” and asserts that Leonardo Da Vinci “would have lived in the inner city.”

Even if this is a family drama, it is an educational one. We do live in a war zone. It is the faulty father who fails to lead the anticolonial struggle beyond its initial gains (an even worse father than drunken Papa in *My Beautiful Laundrette*). The son finds solace only in an accommodation with materialism that must also fail, to be comforted in the end by a cross-race, cross-generation community, but one that is about to be destroyed by Thatcherism (and paves the way for Blair and “New Labour”). Neoliberal bulldozers crush both music and community. Rafi dies. The story is a painful one, the prognosis as bleak as the urban squalor of the time. Intellectual leadership fails—as it often does in films of the time, as with the faulty father in *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1978), Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who cannot lead, despite all his learning (see below). Rosie with her thesis tends toward the sensational, and events transpire despite her efforts. Similarly, the father, Santosh, in Mrinal Sen’s film *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979), must leave the house at the denouement—under postcolonial restitution there is no place for him, a man of books. Those who took the funding offered after the Scarman Inquiry into the Brixton riots,² after the destructive end of *Sammy and Rosie*, have become parodies of the committed intellectual. We are of course inclined to trust more those without such leadership pretensions, but we have not been in the presence of an organized left. Hardly at fault for the decline of radical politics, Rosie was a different sort of party girl.

Viewing the film today, it looks like a rehearsal. The performance of street protests—on the anniversaries of the New Cross Fire,³ the Battle of Lewisham,⁴ Brixton SUS⁵—are made more poignant and have to be evaluated in the context of pressing neo-imperial crises that again evoke the co-constitution of Empire and metropole—the United States and Britain with the Iraq war and Afghanistan, the end of civil liberties and the Green Zone security of the Governing Power; with both here and there brought together in an intimate, almost pornographic, embrace—and this is perhaps just as Kureishi’s *Sammy and Rosie* joyously intended.

Burning Books

The moment when celluloid burns in the projector holds a certain fascination. *Cinema Paradiso* (Tornatore, 1988) and so many other films use this scene to great effect. The curtains burn as Rafi sleeps in *Sammy and Rosie*, but we could also imagine this as a direct commentary on the burning book that (allegedly) started the New Cross Fire. A potent and relevant tragic moment of terror and destruction. A phone book forced through the letterbox opening of a three-story house, 13 dead, nothing said. Clearly I also have Rushdie in mind as the streets burn in *Sammie and Rosie*’s urban guerrilla-style. The image of struggle on the streets is something that we may think belongs to the past, to the 1960s and 1970s, to the Algerian Revolution (Gillo Pontecorvo’s

1966 film *Battle of Algiers*), *Calcutta 1971* (Sen, 1971), or the Red Army Faction struggles in Germany, the years of lead in Italy, and perhaps the England of the early 1980s—Brixton, Peckham, Lewisham, as above. Apart from the occasional flare up in the northern cities, and bad news from remote sites in Asia or the Middle East, the contemporary relevance of such struggles seems historical or theatrical (for the cameras). Mogadishu, Gaza, Fallujah, should have changed this but now that London, New York, and Madrid sweat in the same war, it perhaps might pay off to reexamine some of the street scenes from earlier times. Notting Hill, Brixton, Toxteth, Manningham, Oldham, Bradford—one set of responses. Stop and search, custody deaths, profiling, detention—scaled up internationally on TV as live news, but with special rendition. Kidnapping and remote-controlled drone death, inserted in between the routine bureaucratic arabesques of finance, health, education, workplace, and housing scandals. At the high-profile ends of hypocrisy we have the pomp and circumstance of Westminster, and the bad faith of humanitarian bombing campaigns. Pretension and war—both *for* democracy.

Of course, the burning of books has its own charged and charred history: degenerate art and texts burnt in Nazi Germany; McCarthy-era removal of “communist” books from U.S. libraries (they were burned, as reported in Fried, 1990, p. 136); Umberto Eco’s burning library in *The Name of the Rose* (1983), echoing of course the famous, disputed (Báez, 2008, pp. 51-52) destruction of the Alexandria library; and, as Georges Bataille recounts in *Literature and Evil*, Franz Kafka left instructions that all his books and papers be burned on his death. Of course he told this to “the one friend who had already informed him that he would never do so” (Bataille, 1985, p. 151). Sir Richard Francis Burton’s diaries, letters and papers, and a “superior” translation of the erotic Arabic text *The Perfumed Garden*, were torched by his wife at his death (Báez, 2008, p. 155), and so many more. Burning books is the premise of Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and there are many others. Although the Rushdie controversy starts in India, commentators keep on locating it in Bradford because that burning book image was so evocative . . .

Montage

Why aren’t the streets of London still burning today? What I would suggest is that the complexities of Rushdie and Kureishi’s texts belong to a “back then” and that now South Asians in this country are rendered more simply as terrorists or moderates. Rather than a “backward looking,” “conservative imaginary” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 53), I think we can learn something of the future present from these texts. While for some, the British Asian condition has been glossed as harmless fun through comedy shows and Bollywood fashions, many Britons of South Asian provenance have suddenly been repackaged in an unrecognizably one-dimensional stereotype and retrofitted for extrajudicial deportation or detention. It is not simply an ideological distraction that saturates our screens with the perverse alternative of either terror reports/docu-dramas or celebrity real-estate personal makeover reality TV shows. Burning the streets, overturning cars, burning books even, is for sure all a bit macho; a posturing that no longer has the counterpoint context of left-leaning Rosie and her friends to affirm its validity as a political expression of resistance (“affirmation of human spirit”). Thus, street struggles today lose all ambiguity and all legitimacy—to be rendered merely “terror” in the press without critical commentary or comprehension of grievances. This becomes now a scene in an old movie. In the restricted field of South Asian diasporic production, screens are now filled with “Goodness Gracious Me” (2001), “The Kumars at Number 42” (2005), *Bend It Like Beckham* (Chadha, 2002) and *Bride and Prejudice* (Chadha, 2004). No respite from entertainment vacuity and ideological heartburn.

Those who might once have joined street demonstrations and offered a militant antiracism that had—however difficult—a relation, and relationship, to a left critique of capital are now demonized. South Asian Britons who protest are cast as threatening—only moderate and cowed “community members” are, at best, tolerated in the new security compact. What the years

between Bradford/Brixton and the post-Sept 11/July 7 period have brought us is a narrowing and even erasure of political expression.

Malik

There are those who would attempt a more convoluted explanation of this impasse, of the emptied out terrain (comedy Asians on the one side, bearded terrorists on the other) and attempt a political diagnostic. Kenan Malik, for example, offers a strange amalgam of antiracist activist history and condemnation of “the multiculturalist” tendency in the British context, a failure of the “left.” Malik’s antiracist history owes much to, but does not fully acknowledge, the work of Sivinandan and the Institute of Race Relations, but on multiculturalism he only sees misguided tolerant liberalism paving a path for reaction. What happened around Rushdie’s book? A celebrated, televised, burning of the book in Bradford by those who, according to Malik, acted in large part,

because of disenchantment with the secular left, on the one hand, and the institutionalisation of multicultural policies, on the other. The disintegration of the left in the 1980s, the abandonment by leftwing organisations of the politics of universalism in favour of ethnic particularism, and the wider shift from the politics of ideology to the politics of identity, pushed many young, secular Asians towards Islamism as an alternative worldview (Malik, 2008).

The critique of ethnicity, identity, and multiculturalism misfires, however, where Malik insists on universalism as if it were the only and antithetical inverse of identity and ethnicity. Caught in a complimentary logic, Malik’s scorched earth policy burns his own antiracist credentials and repeats the obvious and automatic reaction—endorsing an integration model for Britain today, at a time which also sees a resurgent ultraright in the British National Party and the center-right drift of all the established parliamentary players (some would call this drift more or less a fire sale or bonfire of older principles). Agreement with some of Malik’s points is possible, and the case can be, and has been, made that “ethnic funding” elevated culturalist “community leaders” as a complicit “bulwark” with which to undermine militant antiracist alliances, but to then diagnose the problem as culture and insist on its overcoming in some naïve secular French Republic-type model is a deeply conservative, even nationalist, error.

Spivak

More interesting is Spivak’s (1993) essay on *The Satanic Verses*, where she uses the occasion of Rushdie to consider other cases written out of the record (the internationalist feminist reading of Shahbano made a “figure” in a contest over votes is exemplary, p. 240), to reflect on the position of Southall Black Sisters in relation to the “controversy” as crisis, and then in this context, to think about “freedom of expression”-talk and the “uses to which the spectacular rational abstractions of democracy can sometimes be put” (p. 241). Rushdie, himself accused of complicity with the West’s imperialist “crusade” against Islam by Ayatollahs and others, surely did not know or intend the extent to which his little fiction would offend, even as he aimed to offend indeed (as he had oftentimes done—*Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* both also banned). More recently of course Rushdie has been forced into many, even far too many, “explanations” of his work of fiction: “I never set out to insult anybody.” He says he offered “an extremely sympathetic portrait of a Muslim (and non-Muslim South Asian) community wrestling with the consequences of transnational migration” (Rushdie, 2009, p. 139).

It is still the case, so many years later, that it is worth remembering that *The Satanic Verses*, as literature, went unread. At the time, something of a rumor (Spivak, 1993, p. 228) spread that Rushdie had engaged in “gossip” about the prophet, and that he had blasphemed against the *Quran*. Of course, it is almost bad taste now to think of Rushdie’s book in terms of the theoretical interests or fashions of its time of writing: when the death of the author thematic was hip, signed under the proper names of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, alongside celebrations of the schizoid self, and a rampant mixture and hybridity that itself celebrated difference and punning. The rumor of promiscuity, in language and more, was welcome then. But author-(and book-seller-)death did not make for easy jokes about the fatwah. These controversies have a different context now, one that cannot ignore the U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, and threatening escalations. Then, Iran was central in a different way, and the Ayatollah railed against America.

Notwithstanding, there is still something to be recalled for today in the literary political analysis of before. Spivak pointed out in her 1993 essay that critics of her reading of *The Satanic Verses* could complain that she “gives resistance no speaking part” in Rushdie’s text (p. 226). But if the book does not enact resistance as a character, perhaps we can agree with Spivak that to “state the problem [of the hybrid, shape-shifting, complicit postcolonial migrant and the ossified, clerical, conservative] is not bad politics.” She continues, “In fact, it might be poor judgement to consider academy or novel as straight blueprint for action on the street” (p. 227). I do not find this far from Adorno’s (1970/1997) critique of an introspective protest against order that is indifferent to, and so ultimately compatible with, that order. Rushdie’s book explores blasphemy and ambiguity within Islam—a complication neither trenchant defenders of the Holy Book, nor those who attack Islam, and desecrate the book in prisons such as Bahgram, Abu-Ghraib, or Guantanamo, can assimilate. The situation is different now, as Evangelist U.S. preachers and English Defence League “associates” burn the Koran simply to provoke (English Defence League, 2011). A belligerent White supremacism fuelled by international weapons commerce, detention, and private security army regimentation, out-and-out invasion and geopolitics, has emerged into the vacuum where critical thinking once prevailed. This vacuum is a consequence, if not of the burning of Rushdie’s book, it at least in some sense follows on from a retreat from the politics of “stating the problem,” where the problem requires a fight against stereotypes and their vicious consequences. I do not think that burning a book today would make one iota of difference here—entire libraries have been destroyed and we see only a mild outrage in the staged statecraft of those who have responsibility for these things. The books are not sacred, of course, but to burn them misses the point.

Spivak writes of Adorno’s article, badly translated in English as “Commitment,” and reports that he says Brecht’s use of montage “simply turns a political problem into a joke.” *Sammy and Rosie* is genuinely funny in parts, but Spivak (1993) likes it for different reasons:

One hopes that Kureishi’s montage technique would have satisfied Adorno. It is much more concerned with negotiating a certain kind of unease, a laughter tinged with unease and bafflement. That comes through in the montage particularly well as the film moves away from realism and the ghostly figure of the torture victim becomes more prominent (p. 254).

Is it the case that *Sammy and Rosie* also offered a multiperspectival and collective mode of storytelling, as Moore-Gilbert (2001), lining up alongside Spivak, would have us believe? In the three-step unfolding of these scenes, it is the figure of Rosie in the middle (well, Rosie and Victoria) that is interesting because here cultural politics and sexual play has helped occlude an older engagement that was first displaced by identity concerns, and is now overwritten with narrow sinister consequences.

Next Next

The identitarian mode of address itself seems to have been suppressed in the constant barrage of station announcements, security alerts, low-level anxiety about left baggage and surveillance—and the suspicion that your neighbor with a beard is no longer a friend called Sammy—instead a more sinister Salman. The tropes have changed, Farishta has morphed again—this is a diagnostic of our time, or rather, can be brought forward to do different duty for our times, even as we recognize the dangerous diminution of the ways in which storytelling as a mediation of multiple points of view, (and varied sexualities, identities, politics) exceeds any easy calculation or ascription of the “proper” and correct interpretive framework (contra Gopinath). What Kureishi’s difficult cinema supplied—and which is lost if the public view of Asians in the metropole ignores the richness of the work of Mathew and Prashad, let along the “queer” diasporas of Gopinath and the potentials of pluralizing Asians of Spivak—must be actively restored. The book burning and the fascist fucking (as well as the triple-fuck scene) were a welcome articulation of a diverse and unsettling settlement. The vehicles of mediation, the pathways for making intentional illustrative juxtapositions or montaged, alliterative, associative points are more than a single image and more than the narrative iteration of next next next. This stacked-up ambiguity was important; to lose it is to lose the war.

It is still perhaps an unresolved question as to whether old literary and cinematic controversies can rise again as prompts for debate. At present they seem damped down under a stark reaction and the global dominant. The quietening of a critical, sexually and intellectually rampant, and promiscuous radical tradition in popular culture—that both Kureishi and Rushdie once wrote for, in some sense—means that efforts to restore the politics of a “ruthless critique of everything that exists” (Marx, 1843) must be more than a shrill voice in the flames. Without Marx *and* queer, without Spivak’s Rosie *and* Sammy, there is no play of perspective, no multiplicity, and the books are ashes that we cannot read.

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Notes

1. This Asia reaches from South East to North East (Philippines, North Korea) and North West to Middle East (Afghanistan, Palestine).
2. Lord Scarman was head of the Government Inquiry into the Brixton riots of 1981. BBC Parliament (2004, 27 April), Q&A: The Scarman Report. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm
3. The New Cross fire occurred in 1981 and involved the tragic loss of 13 young lives.
4. Battle of Lewisham 1977 was a day of running protest against the National Front.
5. Stop under Suspicion laws allowed police to disproportionately harass Black citizens of London, fuelling tensions.

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