Pearson Edexcel

British Asian Literature: A Guide

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Contents

Introduction and background

Introduction

The nine texts focused on in this guide are plays and novels by writers who have been identified in literary criticism as, or who self-identify as, British Asian. They include writers who may identify with more specific terms of reference, such as British Muslim, but not writers with ancestry in China, Japan and other Southeast Asian countries.

The writers in this guide have all spent most of their lives in Britain and many were born in the UK, with others relocating during childhood or as students. Within these points of commonality, however, there are great points of difference in terms of where in Britain the writers are based, their educational backgrounds, their ancestry and their family experiences. For some writers, they are the first generation in their family to be born in Britain, while other writers are the second generation. Some writers come from mixed-ethnicity families; some come from religious households; and others are shaped by a more secular upbringing. These are just a few of the many factors that illustrate the diversity of British Asian voices and the need to avoid generalisations that might obscure the rich depth and dynamic presence of such writers and their contribution to British culture.

Until recently, many of these writers were read under the more generic terminology 'black British' or the term 'black and minority ethnic (BME/BAME)'. Writers will continue to be described in relation to these terms, as well as more generally as British writers, but also, in the case of writers not born in Britain, as postcolonial writers.

Background

There has been a British Asian population since the 17th century and during this period Britain was engaged in a process of overseas colonial expansion. Britain's early efforts to develop an empire included trading activities in South Asia, in particular the activities of the East India Company in India. Men were brought from South Asia, some to work as servants, with the majority being Lascars. These were men of mixed Portuguese and Asian descent, their heritage a result of Portuguese trading in South Asia since the 15th century, who were employed by the East India Company as sailors. Small numbers of Lascars settled in Britain. They started businesses or worked as labourers, as well as continuing to be employed as seamen. By the mid-19th century, their numbers had reached several thousand. Many of these men lived in incredibly poor, cramped and insanitary conditions. Others, however, became prosperous. Sake Dean Mahomed, for example, was a captain of the East India

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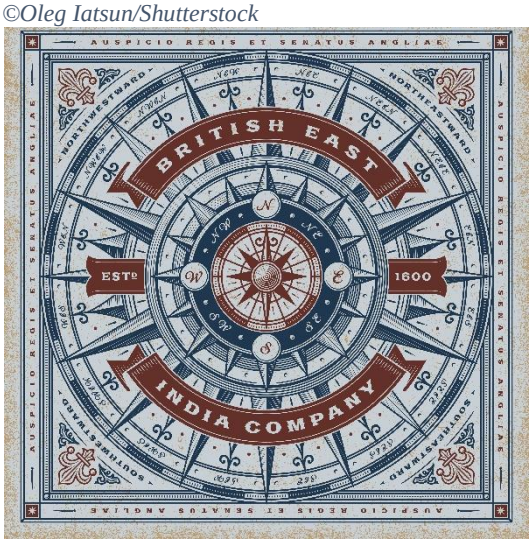
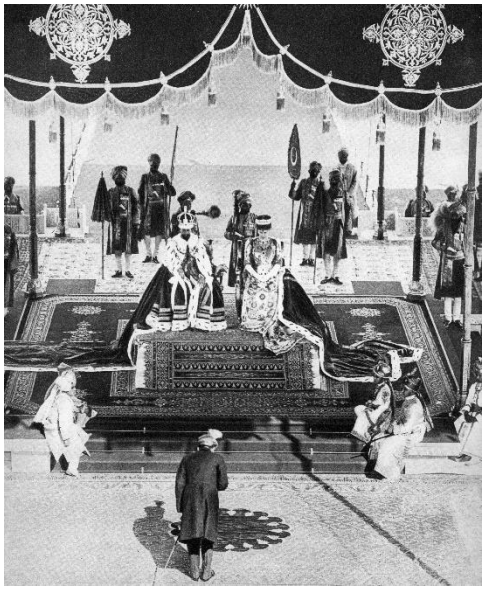


Lascars in London ©Fox Photos/Stringer

Company who settled in Britain in 1810 and started what is considered to be the first-ever Indian restaurant in London.



The number of migrants increased further in the period 1858–1947, during which Britain ruled the Indian subcontinent, in what is sometimes called the British Raj. Migration increased in particular through the movement to Britain of young men from wealthy Indian families who came to the UK to study. One of these men was Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's independence movement, who studied law in London from 1888 to 1891. In 1947, India gained independence from Britain and the nation of Pakistan was also formed.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mass migration to Britain occurred from independence in 1947 onwards although, unlike British Caribbean migration, which expanded rapidly after the end of World War Two in 1945, the main period of Asian migration to Britain did not come until the 1950s and 1960s. The majority of these migrants were men who came from India, Pakistan and what is now Bangladesh (formed as an independent nation in 1971). By 2018, almost equal numbers of British Asians identify with each of these ethnic backgrounds, closely followed by Sri Lankan heritage. Like Caribbean migrants, male workers came in response to British labour shortages; many chose to settle permanently in Britain and often had to save money for many years before they could send for family members back in their 'home' countries to join them. The practice of arranged marriages also saw many women join their new husbands in Britain later on. The arrival of women, children and extended families changed the nature of the British Asian population dramatically, it was no longer predominantly male workers intending to return to South Asia, and a larger and diverse population developed. Strong and vibrant British Asian communities grew up in major cities, including Birmingham, Bradford and Leicester, and, in particular, districts including Southall in West London. Later, in the 1970s, many Asian migrants arrived from African countries, including Kenya and Uganda, after they were expelled during independence movements.

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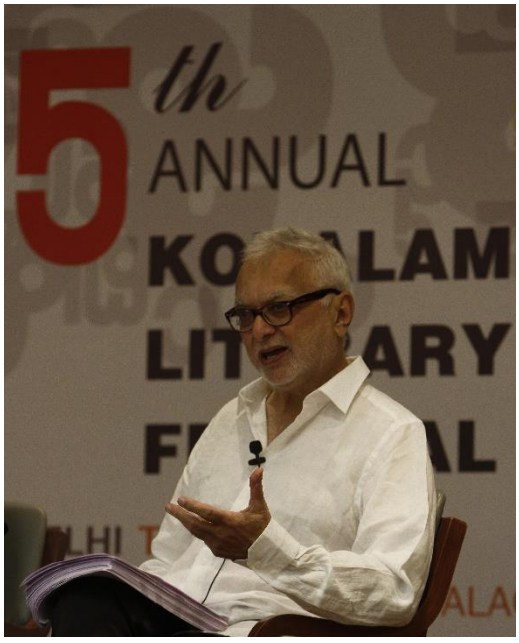
The very first identified British Asian literary work is *Wonder Book of Europe* by I'tisam-ud-Din, a Bengali Muslim who came to Britain from India in 1765 and documented his experiences. Other early writings by South Asians in Britain include the poetry of Hari Singh Gour and the writing of George Desani. Hari Singh Gour was a student at Cambridge University in the 1890s and his later novel, *His Only Love* (1930), is a semi-autobiographical work about a Cambridge scholar. George Desani was a cited influence of Salman Rushdie and his novel *All About H. Hatterr* (1948) was written while he was resident in London. Desani, born in

Kenya, is an example of how, in the post-war migration period, writers of South Asian ethnicity came not only from South Asian countries, but also from African and Caribbean countries. The Trinidadian writer
V.S. Naipaul was the most notable of these writers. His heritage reflected the complex migration histories of South Asians, many of whom were transported to the West Indies during the period of the British Empire, as indentured labourers.

These early writers were associated with wider black British literary movements. Naipaul was part of the same group of writers as Sam Selvon, who contributed to the BBC Radio programme 'Caribbean Voices'. From the mid-1940s, this programme was a valuable outlet for Caribbean writers. They read their work on the programme and for many British people this was their first introduction to contemporary black writing. At the same time, writers who came to Britain from South Asia were writing novels about their experiences. Many of these writers were in Britain for only a few years but their presence established a literary culture that later writers would develop. Mulk Raj Anand came to Britain aged 19. He studied for a PhD in philosophy and lived in England until 1945, publishing 15 books during that time. Anand, a Marxist, was at the centre of a new group for writers, the All-India Progressive Writers' Association, which was formed in London in 1935. The group was a focus point for many ethnic writers in Britain, including Ahmed Ali, whose novel *Twilight in Delhi*, was published in 1940 during a year in London where he became an associate of the famous London Bloomsbury group, which included Leonard Woolf, the widower of novelist Virginia Woolf. Ali was also one of the editors of *Indian Writing*, a magazine that ran from 1940 to 1945. It published reviews of many works by Indian writers, alongside other contributions, and it established a distinct South Asian writing community in London.



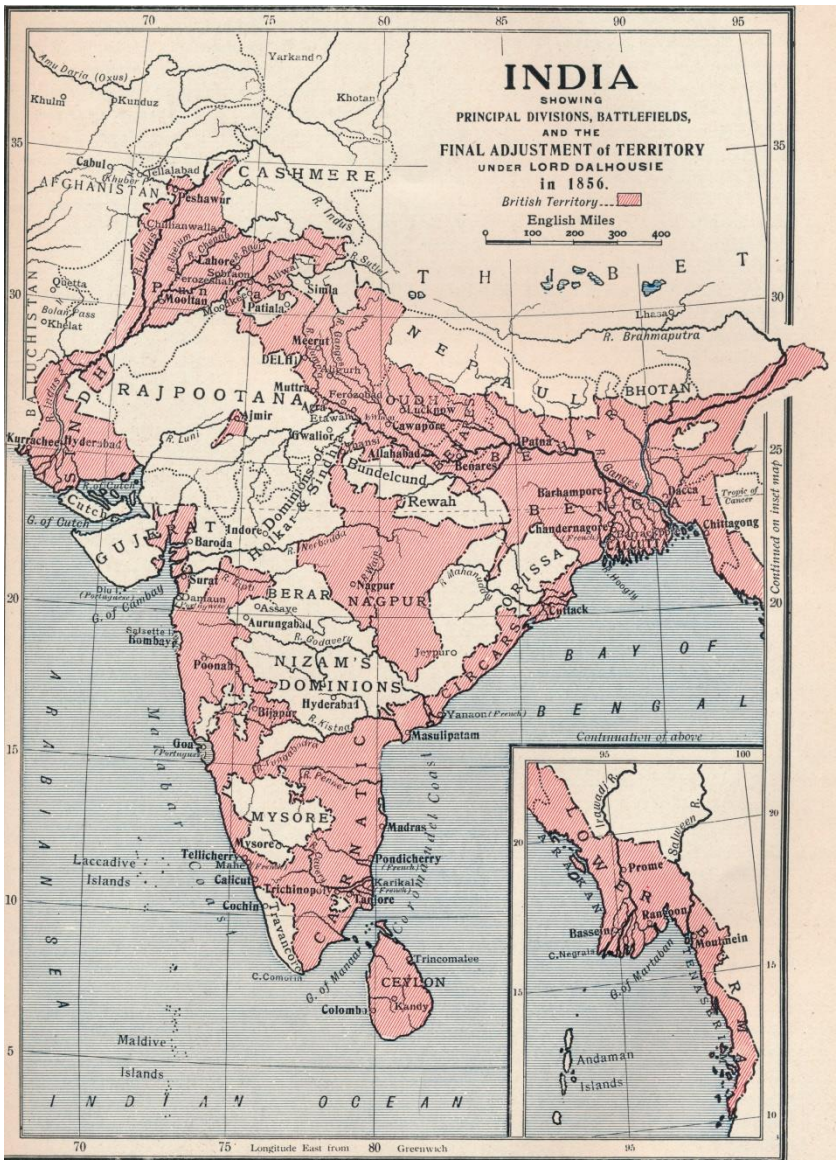
Farrukh Dhondy © Hindustan Times/Contributor

One of the first novelists of note to settle in Britain was S M Marath. He came to Britain to study in 1934 and lived in London until his death in 2003, having published three novels. Of novelists born in Britain, the first to achieve widespread recognition was Aubrey Menen, an Irish-Indian writer, born in London in 1912. Menen published nine novels, powerful satires that examine, with cutting humour, his feelings about identity, both in terms of nationality and gender. In the 1970s, Farrukh Dhondy published two of the earliest works examining the experience of growing up as British Asian. His two children's books *East End at Your Feet* (1976) and *Come to Mecca* (1978) are both early narratives that celebrate Britain's multiculturalism. This period also saw the emergence of female British Asian writers,

British colonial administrators meet with Lord Mountbatten Viceroy of India, to plan the partition of India 1947© Universal History Archive/Contributor

notably Attia Hosain. She came to Britain in 1947 and her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) explores the partition of India and Pakistan through the perceptions of a young female protagonist.

Today's writers are the inheritors of these literary traditions, with a wide range of cultural influences and linguistic backgrounds, bringing the complex and often painful history of migration and colonialism that this earlier writing reflects. We continue to see in their work a focus on questions of identity and reflection on the complicated issue of national belonging. This new generation has a distinct perspective, unafraid of big political questions and of creating work that challenges stereotypes of what it means to be British today.



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1) *A Wicked Old Woman*, Ravinder Randhawa (1987)

Ravinder Randhawa was born in India in 1952 but was raised in Warwickshire from the age of seven, and lived her adult life in London. Her novel *A Wicked Old Woman* can be seen as the first British Asian novel of note written by a female author.

The novel tells the story of Kulwant, a middle-aged British Asian woman living in London. Kulwant is divorced and finds herself viewed suspiciously by the other women in her community and is alienated from her sons. She spends her days in disguise as an old woman, which allows her to explore the city without scrutiny and to escape the judgements that have negatively affected her self-worth. The novel traces her encounters in her travels with a number of other women who are similarly disaffected, mistreated and damaged. This includes Kulwant's oldest friend, a white British woman called Caroline and a documentary film maker called Maya.

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The women form a community, which allows them to support each other, and the novel explores the outcomes of these relationships though fluid, stream of consciousness dialogues. At the end of the novel, one of the women, Rani, is close to mental breakdown and the other women gather to help her into a place of healing. Kulwant finally abandons her disguise and the novel concludes with an optimistic sense of an alternative community that challenges the prejudices of wider British society.

Key themes of the novel

- **Cultural invisibility** – one of the characters in the novel, Maya, declares 'We're making ourselves invisible, which is precisely what they want us to be.'. As a British Asian female raised in Britain in the 1950s, Kulwant feels invisible to the society around her, even more than male migrants who have access to more power, structured through their gender. The novel suggests that British Asian women are forced to assimilate into a British culture that demands that they obscure their difference in order to be accepted.

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- **Cultural hybridity** – Kulwant attempts to negotiate the Indian influences of her parents, along with that of the British culture of which she finds herself a part. The novel explores her attempts to combine these two influences and, what is presented pessimistically, as largely negative results. She feels herself to be both British and Indian, but feels out of place in both cultures as a result. In the novel, the idea of a hybrid inbetween space is represented as fraught territory that risks mental breakdown and social isolation.

- **Identity performance** – Kulwant's way of dealing with her lack of sense of belonging is to take on the identity of an old woman, Mrs Singh. Although this may seem like a strange choice, it allows Kulwant a different kind of invisibility. As old women are largely unnoticed, Kulwant is able to behave in ways that would be subject to scrutiny if they were associated with a younger woman. She describes herself as 'a newly emergent Machiavelli'. Through this strategy, the novel explores the parallels between different kinds of silenced subjects, asking readers to consider how older people and those from migrant communities are treated in Britain.

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- **Female solidarity** – the novel centres on a group of women whose differences are levelled out by their shared opposition to white-racist oppression. The novel presents female community as the answer to not only white racism but also as a safe space against patriarchy. Among its themes, it deals with postnatal depression, divorce, physical and sexual abuse, and poor working conditions. The power of female community to challenge these inequalities and mistreatments, and to cut across racial lines in doing so, is represented most strongly at the end of the novel when Rani is healed by the other women.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Stream of consciousness** – the novel is written in a modernist-influenced stream of consciousness prose that allows Randhawa to focus on the internal thoughts of her central character. This technique can make the novel difficult to follow at points but it reflects the confusion of Kulwant and her uncertain place in British culture. The technique also captures effectively the multiple voices and differing experiences of the novel, which are frequently expressive of a trauma that the disjointed modernist form is unable to capture.
- **Dialect** – Randhawa's women embody hybridity, they speaking Anglicised Punjabi. This language reflects a generation that has embraced cultural differences, making an identity of their own that cannot easily be compared to earlier migrant cultures of traditional Britishness. Here, language is offered as a strong contributor to multiculturalism and as a challenge to racist ideas of cultural isolationism.

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- **Comedy** – Kulwant's transformation into an old woman is a comic device that plays on the notion of pantomime and clowning. As an old woman she is able to behave scandalously without notice and the joke shared with the reader is about the unreality of her appearance. It is also, however, a bittersweet comedy that reflects on her social isolation and the need for her disguise so that she can escape the scrutiny of British society as a young Asian woman.

Context

- **Literary context** – Randhawa was a founder of the Asian Women Writers' Workshop (AWWW), which she established with Rukhsana Ahmad, Rahila Gupta and Leela Dhingra in London in 1984. Randhawa not only wrote prolifically about the lives of British Asian women, she also fostered the careers of others, including Meera Syal, who used the workshop to develop their own writing, and to publish for the first time in anthologies such as *Right of Way* (1988) and *Flaming Spirit* (1994). Setting up the AWWW in 1984, Randhawa convinced funding bodies such as the Greater London Council (GLC), Black Ink, Lambeth Council and Greater London Arts, of the value of Asian women's writing. The later renaming of the AWWW as the Asian Women Writers' Collective says much about its socialist and communal ethos. The group brought together migrant and British-born/raised writers, and identified an 'Asian' community against broader black, feminist or socialist politics. The Collective was involved in outreach programmes in local communities and schools, with an explicitly social, as well as literary, function. *A Wicked Old Woman* reflects the feminist spirit of the literary community that Randhawa founded, focusing on the lives of British Asian women.

- **Political context** – the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* was, in the 1980s, deeply involved in the black and Asian feminist movement. Almost every issue in the 1980s had a feature on 'ethnic' feminism, including reviews of Randhawa's fiction, and reviews and extracts from the black and Asian feminist anthology *Charting the Journey*. Randhawa's work captures the mutual support of this period: the Asian women are encouraged by the wider feminist movement but the wider movement is also supported by the Asian women, who are able to identify with the bigger causes.
- **Socio-political context** – the novel is informed by differing attitudes to older-age people in Britain and India. In India, it is common for older people to be venerated and it is considered normal for their families to look after them until death, with multigenerational living a widespread practice. This contrasts with the tendency for families in Britain to be centred around two generations. This difference in attitude was enhanced in the wider context of 1980s British politics, which was dominated by the Conservative government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and a strong emphasis on wealth creation, the pursuit of personal happiness and individual, rather than communal. responsibility.
- **Author's life** – Randhawa worked for Asian women's groups responsible for refuges and other facilities, she actively campaigned against racism, specifically for the rights of Asian and black women. The strident female community in her novel reflects this activity.

Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on the development of British Asian women's writing. It is recommended that students use an academic library search engine to access these journals. Other critical sources include:

- author website
- an interview with Ravinder Randhawa by whispering stories (published 9 February 2017, updated 26 January 2018)
- Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora* (London: Palgrave, 2001)
- Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2011), Chapter 4, Ravinder Randhawa.

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- Other Randhawa novels. Randhawa's second novel is a work of young adult fiction, *Hari-jan*, which focuses on a confident, young British Asian woman and her involvement in a beauty pageant. Like *Wicked*, it explores themes of youth identity, female embodiment, and cultural hybridity. Her most recent novel, *The Coral Strand*, shares Wicked's modernist style and explores the relationship between three women whose lives intertwine in Mumbai. It is similarly concerned about questions of female cultural identity and independence.
- *A Hundred Shades of White* – Preethi Nair. Nair's novel focuses on the dialogue between Maya, a young British Asian woman, and her mother Nalini. The novel moves between the perspectives of the two women and can be seen, therefore, to contrast the different generational female British Asian experiences that Kulwant experiences through her disguise.
- *Paradise* – Toni Morrison. Morrison's novel is centred on an African American community of women who have established themselves outside of mainstream society. Like *A Wicked Old Woman*, it makes use of modernist stream of consciousness to reflect the mental confusion of its characters and emphasises the power of female community in the wake of abuse and trauma.
- *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* – Meera Syal. Syal's novel tells the story of three young British Asian women and their contrasting fortunes in contemporary Britain. Like *A Wicked Old Woman*, the novel makes use of comedic device to examine the ironies and dynamism of British Asian culture. It also shares with Randhawa's novel a strong sense of female British Asian community and a concern for its role in empowering women to examine their independence and desires.
- *Orlando* – Virginia Woolf. At the centre of *A Wicked Old Woman* is the notion of disguise as empowerment and social criticism. This idea of disguise resonates with a strong literary history, particularly in the plays of William Shakespeare. Another novel that examines this territory is *Orlando*, by the modernist novelist Virginia Woolf. Woolf's central character shifts gender and the novel examines this transformation in the context of emerging feminist politics.

2) *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi (1990)

The Buddha of Suburbia is British Asian novelist Hanif Kureishi's first novel. It is the story of Karim, who feels stifled by his life in suburban 1970s London and decides to pursue a career in the theatre. The novel opens with Karim attending a guided mediation and performance by his father, who he witnesses having sex with a woman named Eva. At the same event, Karim has sex with Charlie, who is Eva's son. Karim goes to visit his Aunt Jean and Uncle Ted, who try to convince him that his father's Buddhist activities must stop. Karim seeks the advice of his friend, Jamila, whose father is trying to force her into an arranged marriage. When her husband, Changez, arrives it emerges that he is disabled and Karim begins to feel warmly towards him. His father tells him that he is leaving his mum for Eva and Jean and Ted go and collect her from the family home, taking Karim's younger brother, Allie, with them. Karim stays with his dad and Eva, and tries to help Changez in his attempts to woo Jamila. He is supposed to be going to college but does not attend. While Changez is out visiting a prostitute, Karim and Jamila have sex but wake to find that Changez has returned. Feeling ashamed, Karim does not show up for any of his exams and fails them all.

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Eva buys a new flat in central London and Karim begins working for Charlie, who is incredibly mean to him. At one of Eva's parties, he meets Shadwell, a theatre director who casts him as Mowgli in a production of *The Jungle Book* because he is looking for someone 'authentic' (although Karim has never been to India). Here he meets Terry, a Welsh working-class communist supporter. Karim is offered a role by another director, called Pyke, and during rehearsals meets Eleanor, who is English and pretends to be working class although she is from a privileged background. They become lovers but Karim is being pressured by Pyke who wants characters based on real-life people. Eleanor and Karim have a sexual experience with Pyke and his wife, which is the beginning of an affair between the director and Karim's lover. Jamila's father dies and she moves to a commune with Changez, where she falls pregnant by a man called Simon. The play opens in New York, where Karim ends up staying with Charlie. Realising that he does not care for him, he returns to London to star in a television show. On his return, he visits his dad and Eva, and then his mother, who now has a much younger boyfriend. After talking with Allie, he goes to the commune and falls asleep, where he overhears Changez discussing Jamila's refusal to sleep with him. He goes back to his dad's the next morning and reveals the news about his mother's new boyfriend. The novel ends with Karim celebrating his new job and Eva and Karim's dad announcing their engagement.

Key themes of the novel

- **The city and suburbs** – like many of Kureishi's novels, *Buddha* is set in London and its suburbs. It examines the ways in which urban cultures facilitate the mixing of different ethnic groups and promote cultural exchange. The novel is filled with real-world details about west London and Karim has an insider's knowledge of the city, which adds to the sense that he is a character who is able to claim Britishness on his own terms and in relation to both white British and Pakistani culture. This dynamic city culture is frequently compared with the suburbs, which are presented as more traditional and creatively stifling spaces in which people 'rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness'.

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- **Ethnicity** – the novel has been described as 'posed ethnic', meaning that it self-consciously evokes themes of race and identity similar to those present in postcolonial literature from formerly colonised countries. The novel is often comic or irreverent in its treatment of racism, Karim's father plays at being 'the Buddha',
- Charlie forges a career 'selling Englishness' and Karim himself portrays an 'authentic' Indian in his acting career, for popularity and prosperity. This awareness of performance shows a self-aware engagement with identity and points to the confidence of a new generation who are staking their claim to Britishness.
- **Mixed-race identities** – like *East is East*, *Buddha* focuses on a mixed-race protagonist whose mother is white British and whose father is Pakistani. In Karim's family, the same tensions potentially exist as across national cultures. Yet the fact that Karim's father is frequently performing different identities means that the idea of a straightforward clash of cultural positions is rejected.
- **Sexuality** – Karim identifies as bisexual and he declares 'I felt it would be heartbreaking to have to choose one or the other'. His fluid sexual desires mirror his understanding of ethnicity as something that should be allowed to encompass multiple influences. In this context, sexual experimentation is a politically radical act that unravels normative and traditional ideas of identity.
- **Religion** – like many of Kureishi's novels, *Buddha* is highly critical of religion in all forms, it is seen as stifling creativity. Religion is associated with conservative, traditional values. The novel describes that in the suburbs 'it was a lovely day but their routine never changed ... People in hats and suits were coming back from church and they carried Bibles'.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Humour** – Kureishi uses humour to present an irreverent take on British Asian identity, which, in not taking itself too seriously, illustrates British Asian confidence and belonging. This humour also allows the novel's representations of racism to stand out and become more impactful as the novel frequently shifts in tone.
- **Realism** – Kureishi makes use of a realist style that adds to the sense of a British Asian confidence through close reference to London streets and landmarks. Unlike the migrant subject who is alienated in the city, Kureishi's style reflects characters who own the city and know its pathways intimately.

- **Picaresque** – the novel can be seen as a contemporary reworking of the form of the picaresque, a novel form associated with the episodic adventures of an appealing but roguish central character. Unlike the traditional picaresque hero, Karim is from a middle-class background and is relatively privileged. The novel remakes the genre, therefore, by exploring the exclusions created by ethnic prejudice and how they force Karim into the position of outsider or rebel.
- ***Bildungsroman*** – Kureishi's novel can also be considered in the context of the form of the *Bildungsroman*, which means 'novel of development'. The novel traces Karim as he comes to realise his ambitions and moves from a state of relative innocence to greater understanding. The critic Mark Stein has defined a genre of Black British *Bildungsroman*, which uses the form to examine questions of identity and belonging, and *Buddha* is referenced as one of his examples.

Context

- **Author context** – Kureishi is often identified as the first British Asian author born in Britain to have commercial success. He was already well known by the time of the publication of Buddha, through his successful screenplay *My Beautiful Launderette*, which is set in the 1980s during Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government and, like *Buddha*, explores the relationship between questions of race and sexual identity. Some aspects of *Buddha* are autobiographical – like Karim, the novelist is the son of a white mother and a Pakistani father, and he grew up in the London suburbs.
- **Historical context** – the novel was published in 1990 but is set in the 1970s. Like *East is East*, it is haunted by the shadow of Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech and the escalating racial tensions of the period.
- **Social context** – the novel is informed by changing attitudes towards sexuality. In the 1960s, sexual attitudes became far more liberal. By the 1980s, this sexual liberalism had been deeply affected by the AIDS crisis. The novel is, therefore, set in a 'golden age' of sexual experimentation in which people were freer to explore different sexual behaviours and roles, with little risk.

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Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on Kureishi's work. It is recommended that students use an academic library search engine to access these journals. Other critical sources include:

- Bradley Buchanan, *Hanif Kureshi* (London: Macmillan, 2007)
- Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001)
- Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2004)
- Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2011), Chapter 2

- Nahem Yousef, *The Buddha of Suburbia: a Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2002).

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- Other Hanif Kureishi novels. Kureishi's novels *The Black Album* and *Something to Tell You* are also concerned in different ways with questions of cultural identity. *The Black Album* examines a young British Asian man, Shahid, who is caught between his desire to follow a strict religious path and his sexual attraction to his university tutor. *Something to Tell You* is the darkly comic story of Jamal Khan, a psychoanalyst in his 50s, who is haunted by the violence of his past and is negotiating the complexities of his present as a divorced father. It is considered a return to the territory of *Buddha*, as it repeats the earlier novel's concerns for questions of ethnic identity and belonging.
- *26a* – Diana Evans. Evans' novel tells the story of mixed-race twins Bessie and Georgia, and their lives in London. Written more recently than *Buddha*, it can be seen to update Kureishi's tale to offer a narrative in which ethnic diversity has become more commonplace and comfortable for the central characters. Despite this comfort, however, the novel examines the devastating consequences of childhood events and the ways in which they can shape individual sense of self. The novel contains discussion of suicide.
- *Great Expectations* – Charles Dickens. Dickens' novel is the story of Pip, a young boy attempting to make his fortune in Victorian London. Like *Buddha*, it can be considered a *Bildungsroman*, as it traces Pip's development from a young boy to his success in London as a grown man. As *Buddha* examines the barriers to success caused by racial prejudice, *Great Expectations* examines the barriers of class, which potentially prevent Pip from fully realising his dreams.
- *Tourism* – Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal. *Tourism* is an acerbically comic narrative, centred on the character of Bhupinder Singh, a young man living in London just after the millennium. Bhupinder is an anti-hero who is shocking and inflammatory, and the novel centres on his sexual exploits and outrageous treatment of those around him. Perhaps best viewed as a contemporary updating of *Buddha*, it combines its provocative language and actions with sharp comments on racial prejudice and contemporary politics.
- *White Teeth* – Zadie Smith. Smith's novel is also a comic intervention into questions of hybridity and London's multi-ethnic community. It tells the story of two north London families – the Iqbals, and the Jones. The Iqbal family have twin sons, Magid and Millat, whose lives take very different paths; the Jones family have one daughter, Irie, who is of mixed English and Jamaican heritage. Like *Buddha* it features a strong narrative around generation difference and the complexities of mixed-race identities.

3) *East is East*, Ayub Khan-Din (1996)

Ayub-Khan Din's first play, the comedy drama *East is East*, was first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in October 1996. The play is set in Salford, a district of Greater Manchester in North West England, in 1970. It tells the story of George Khan, who has migrated to the UK from Pakistan, his white British wife Ella and their six children, Abdul, Tariq, Maneer, Saleem, Meenah and Sajit.

The play is structured in two acts, with ten scenes. At the beginning of the play, George is angry that his son Sajit has not been circumcised and argues about it with his wife Ella. The first act continues with a series of scenes that introduce the distinct personalities of the Khan children and George's intentions to marry Abdul and Tariq in arranged marriages to the two daughters of a man called Mr Shah. When Sajit reveals the plans to Tariq, he objects. Act 1 ends with a trip to the doctor with Sajit and a discussion about his mental health and a growing sense of his alienation.

Act 2 opens with Tariq, Meenah and Saleem eating pork products in a comic exploration of cultural hybridity. In Scene 2, the children debate their ethnic definition, Ella and George get into a violent argument about the future of the children and Sajit witnesses his father beating his mother. When Saleem tries to speak to his father about the marriage, he too is beaten. In the wake of events, Abdul and Tariq try to decide whether to leave or to continue to reason with their father. The final scene of the play begins with the family getting ready for Mr Shah's visit. Saleem reveals his artwork, which is a model of a vagina, and when Ella tries to take it from him, he runs into the front room and it lands in front of Mr Shah. Ella and Mr Shah argue as he insults the family and she throws him out and ends the engagements. George is immediately angry and beats Ella again. Sajit hits him with his parka, which is the coat that has served as his protection throughout the play. Abdul stops the fight, but Ella defends George and tells the children they need to be more respectful. The play ends with the children debating how they can make things better for their mother and Sajit throwing away his coat into the bin.

Key themes of the play

- **Migration** – a major theme of the play is the Asian experience of migration to Britain and its role in shaping British Asian identities. George is in many ways an unsympathetic character. He fails to understand the dilemmas faced by his children, imposes harsh rules and is hypocritical, having married a white British woman and yet holding many racist views. The play explores, however, how George's views are shaped as he recounts the racism and social exclusion that led to his defensive attitude and disrespect for British society. Like many migrants, George's initial view of England as

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a second home has been destroyed by the prejudice he has faced, leading him to look towards his home in Pakistan for safety and acceptance.

- **Cultural hybridity** – *East is East* explores the notion of what is called 'hybridity': the mixing of two or more different cultural traditions to create new forms of identity. George's children are all very different. They represent the multiple ways in which the combination of different cultures can shape identities. Meenah, Tariq and Saleem's debates about how to define themselves illustrate the confusion for young people who must try to define themselves across cultural boundaries. At the same time, however, the play celebrates individuality. Tariq and Meenah are the most westernised, eating bacon and sausages but Meenah is less westernised than her brother, enjoying Asian music. Maneer is, in fact, very similar to his father, despite having exactly the same upbringing as his brothers and sisters, and Abdul and Saleem exist in between. This suggests that there is something personal, something intangible, which cannot be located easily in cultural background, that determines an individual's way of looking at the world and emphasises how the mixing of different cultural influences can produce dynamic and unpredictable new ways of thinking and behaving.
- **The 'generation gap'** – although all children are different from their parents, the play examines the idea of the 'generation gap' as something that is deepened by cultural hybridity. George has different relationships with each of his children; his relationship with Maneer is strong, while his relationship with Tariq is filled with conflict. The differing relationships George has with each of his children allows the play to consider to what extent this idea is useful or whether it is, in fact, a myth.
- **Mixed-race identities** – the play complicates further ideas of cultural hybridity through the engagement with the theme of racial hybridity. George and Ella's children not only have to navigate the differences between their father's Pakistani culture and British society but also these tensions in their own family, through the cultural differences between George and Ella. It is Sajit who is seen to most represent the trauma of this dilemma; the string that he needs to cut as he goes round corners is a symbol of his desire to escape the confusion and cultural tensions of his home environment. Outside the home, the Khan children face racism from people such as Mr Shah, directed specifically at their mixed-race identities. The play examines in this respect the prejudice around racial purity, which means that people with mixed-race heritage face racism from all sections of society.
- **Britishness** – overarching these themes is a concern for the ways in which mixed-race and culturally hybrid identities are re-shaping British culture into a new definition of Britishness, which cannot be defined by either Christianity or whiteness. The play explores the tensions that result from this social and cultural change but also celebrates the dynamism of a new generation of British citizens who are able to embrace difference.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Comedy** – the use of comic devices allows the play to address difficult themes of racist and domestic abuse in ways that might otherwise alienate audiences because of their harsh subject matter. This strategy encourages audiences to think about the play's challenging themes without being oppositional. Comedy also reflects the dynamism of British Asian culture as a positive contribution to the changing nature of Britishness, rather than as simply a source of conflict.
- **Dramatic irony** – by revealing character actions to the audience, which are unknown to other characters, the play creates dramatic tension, which emphasises the themes of conflict and difference. Behind George's back, his children reveal their true attitudes towards his parenting and towards Pakistani culture, while Nazir hides

the secret of his sexuality. This irony illustrates the difficulties in communication across cultural boundaries and between the British-born and migrant generations.

- **Dialogue** – the play uses dialogue to draw a sharp contrast between the different characters and to emphasise their cultural differences. Most sharply, the play distinguishes between George, Ella, and the Khan children. George's broken English represents his migrant past but also his alienation from traditional British culture. George also changes his language in different contexts, exhibiting the ability of the migrant to strategically employ different registers. More subtly, the play uses dialogue to distinguish the differing relationships of each of the children to British identity. Sajit's lack of speech is representative of the trauma of being caught between different cultural positions, a literal silencing of his own experience in the midst of family conflict.
- **Costume** – Sajit's parka is used in the play to symbolise the need for young British Asians to protect their identities in the wake of the pressures of familial and community values. When Sajit beats George with his coat, it represents his desire to stop hiding his identity and to challenge his father's abuse. Throwing off the coat at the end of the play indicates a possibility of a different, potentially more positive future.

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Context

- **Cultural context** – Din's play is the first well-known British Asian play. Alongside Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Gurinder Chadha's screenplays such as *Bhaji on the Beach*, it marked the introduction into drama of a recognised British Asian presence. The success of the play brought new attention to the British Asian Theatre production group, Tamasha, which produced the play alongside The Royal Court and Birmingham Rep. At the same time as this was taking place, British Asian culture was also becoming more prominent on radio and television. The comedy show *Goodness Gracious Me* was launched on BBC Radio Four in 1996 (the same year as *East is East*) and on television on BBC Two in 1998. The show shares with *East is East* a cutting examination of racism and white stereotypes, alongside a comic appraisal of British Asian cultural traditions that marks British Asian confidence in its ability to laugh at its own culture while using that laughter to challenge prejudice.
- **Historical context** – the play is set in Salford in the 1970s and is haunted by a previous decade of ethnic tensions, most notably the infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech made by Enoch Powell in 1968. In his speech, Powell read out a letter from a constituent who was angered by immigration levels and this drove strong anti-immigration sentiment in Britain. At the same time, Pakistan was involved in a war of independence with what would become Bangladesh. George's own insecurities can be seen to reflect this international context.

Salford in 1974 © Mirrorpix/Contributor/Getty Images

- **Author's life** – the play is partly autobiographical. Din was born in Salford in 1961 and his own father is Pakistani while his mother is English. He was one of ten children, who he says he amalgamated to produce the six siblings in the play.

Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on ethnicity and identity in British drama. It is recommended that students use a search engine in an academic library to access these journals. Other sources include:

- Ayub Khan-Din interview (2005) from the British Library audio archive:
- Ayub Khan-Din, '*East is East*: the Play I Almost Didn't Write', *The Guardian* 21 Oct 2009 newspaper article
- Dominic Hingorani, *British Asian Theatre: Dramaturgy, Process and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)
- Hanif Kureishi, 'The Rainbow Sign' in *Collected Essays*, by Hanif Kureishi (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 3-34.

Possible coursework pairings/other plays to consider

- Other Ayub Khan-Din plays. Khan-Din produced a sequel to *East is East*, entitled *West is West*, which examines what has happen to George and his family six years after the original play. Khan-Din's *Rafta Rafta* is another comedy drama that focuses on the conflicts between a migrant father and his British Asian son. It is set in Bolton, which is also a town in Greater Manchester.
- *Gladiator Games* – Tanika Gupta. Gupta's play examines the real-life story of a young British Asian man murdered while imprisoned in a young offender's institution. Focused on the institutional racism surrounding his treatment and the investigation of the case, the play shares with *East is East* a concern for the plight of young British Asian men and their potential alienation from mainstream society.
- *My Beautiful Launderette* – Hanif Kureishi. Kureishi's screenplay also examines British Asian youth culture, but this time set in the 1980s. It also features mixed-race relationships, focusing on the gay love story between a young British Asian man and his white lover. While *East is East* is set in the north of England, Kureshi's screenplay in set in London and offers interesting comparisons in terms of both time and place.
- *Leave Taking* – Winsome Pinnock. Pinnock's play centres on three generations of Afro-Caribbean women, it examines the coming together of different generations but also the conflict between them. Like *East is East*, the play examines how different experiences of migration, racism, and tradition construct complex relationships with national belonging.
- *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet* – William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is also a story that centres on a father figure and his contrasting relationships with his children. Like George, Lear is a difficult and conflicted individual, and each of his daughters must navigate their future in relation to his strong will. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the young lovers must navigate their futures in relation to the strong prejudices of their parents and the society around them. Juliet's relationship with her father is a strong battle of wills between her own desires and her father's intentions for her.

4) *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* – Salman Rushdie (1999)

In the 1930s in Bombay, two boys Ormus Cama and Umeed (Rai) Merchant, become acquaintances through the connections between their two families. As the boys grow up, they meet Vina Aspara, who is of mixed Greek-Indian parentage and who has moved from America to India. Vina has had a traumatic childhood but she and Ormus fall in love and, united by their musical talents, they become internationally famous rock stars. Their relationship is tumultuous and they are frequently separated. The novel's narrator, Rai, observes their love from a distance, harbouring the secret of his own desire for Vina, which results only in a short liaison between them. At the novel's conclusion, Vina is killed in an earthquake in Mexico, separating her forever from Ormus.

Bombay circa 1930

The novel contains multiple sub-plots, most notably the story of Ormus' explorations of alternative universes. This sub-plot reveals the fact that the world in which the characters live is not, in fact, our world but rather one of the other parallel universes. In the world of the novel, there are key differences to the 'real' world, among them the fact that iconic musical works have not been written, meaning that in the novel they are written by Ormus. Other differences include the fact that in the world of the novel, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy never happened.

Key themes of the novel

- **Globalisation** – the novel moves between London, New York and India, and its central characters are equally comfortable in each place. They represent a world in which multiculturalism has become accepted and where 'footsteps are the only fixed place' but it is also one in which that multiculturalism is exoticised and used for profit by the western media. A shrinking world has been created by media technologies and travel possibilities, so that the distance between places is shortened. Celebrities such as Vina are globally famous and they create the possibility of connection between people across national borders, united by fan culture. The novel makes clear, equally, that such contemporary states are both new and yet universal. Against the movement of its central characters sits a world in which passports are restricted and, for some, movement continues to be impossible. This inequality creates a world in which, for some, globalisation has made them only more excluded, as the shrinking world is one to which they have no access.
- **Hybridity** – the novel espouses a world of both ethnic and cultural hybridity, in which characters declare 'I don't have to choose… I don't have to be this guy or that guy… I'll be all of them'. While there is exhilaration in this possibility of embracing multiple identities, Ormus in particular suffers an increasing sense of dislocation as a result of his lack of rootedness and endless transformation. Ormus' literal movement into alternative worlds is an exaggerated form of the cultural dislocation that hybridity may evoke.

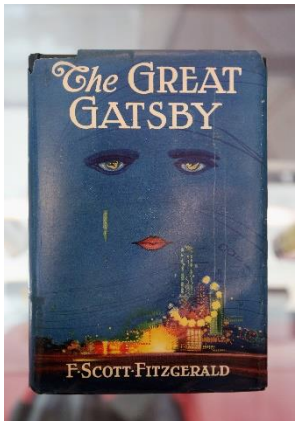
- **Celebrity culture** – much of the novel centres on the destructive effects of celebrity on the character of Vina Aspara, who we trace from her Indian childhood to global music star status. As Vina becomes more and more famous, we see her relationships with Rai and Ormus deteriorate, with tragic consequences for both Vina and Ormus. The novel examines how the world of mass media shapes identities and how it creates a potentially new form of alienation from notions of home and belonging. Yet, alongside this, it embodies the idea of self-making and renewal, which allows characters to break free of fixed ideas of race, gender and class.
- **Migration** – Vina's own experience of migration is uncharacteristic, as she moves from America to India. This begins a focus in the novel on the dislocation of migration and its effect on the development of the self. The novel is ambivalent about migration and its implications. On the one hand, there is the sense of home being self-made so that Rai declares 'a kind of India happens everywhere'. Yet on the other hand, the fates of Vina and Ormus suggest some kind of loss, as a result of their detachment from their place of birth.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Magical realism** – the novel uses a form that combines realist narrative with magical events. Unlike fantastic literature, magical realism seamlessly interweaves realist and magical elements, and is not designed to disturb or unsettle the reader. It is a form particularly associated with postcolonial literatures and Rushdie's transference of the form to a western context allows him to emphasise the often surreal lives of migrants as they move between different cultures, here represented in the presence of parallel universes.
- **Hyperbole** – Rushdie's characters often engage in exaggerated forms of speech, which present the heightened reality for migrant characters. This is characteristic of Rushdie's fiction but here also serves a function in capturing the larger-than-life media personalities the novel explores. For this reason, hyperbole is particularly evident in the character of Vina, whose celebrity status is captured in her outlandish mode of speaking.
- **Polyphonia** – Rushdie's text is many voiced, referring to Indian languages as well as English. This fusion captures the hybrid identities of his characters, who are international and comfortable across different geographies and in contrasting cultural spaces, but it also adds to the novel's sense of exuberant energy, which is a characteristic feature of Rushdie's work.
- **Myth** – the novel invokes the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. This myth informs the novel's romance sub-plot and, in particular, Rai's presence as a narrator. By evoking classical text, Rushdie creates an equivalence between his own narrative, centred on popular culture, and canonical works of literature. This strategy is a common feature of postmodern texts, which frequently attempt to break down distinctions between high art and popular culture.

Orpheus and Eurydice

- **Referentiality** – the novel is informed by frequent references to other literary texts, including *The Great Gatsby* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These references serve to connect the novel to a broader global literary culture, reinforcing the sense of the novel's international scope. They also serve to enhance particular themes in the text, for example references to *The Great Gatsby* connect the migrants' stories to the idea of the 'American Dream', while references to *The Lord of the Rings* connect the novel to ideas of marvellous worlds.



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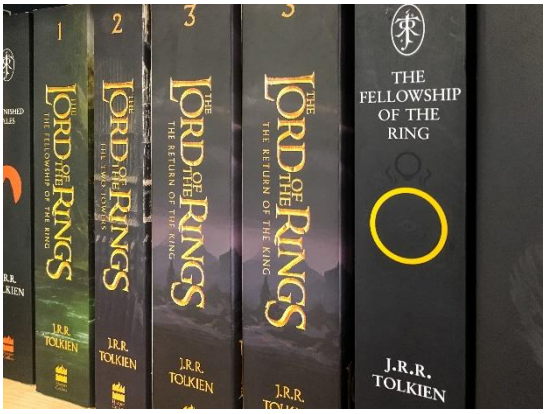

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Context

- **Author context** – in 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini issues a fatwa, in the form of a death sentence, against Rushdie for accused blasphemy in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The accusations centred on Rushdie's description of a brothel, in which the women were named after the Prophet Muhammad's wives, but also on the novel's contention that some verses of the Qur'an were not, in fact, transcribed by the Prophet but written by him. Rushdie spent the next nine years in hiding under police protection. He became an infamous figure in the literary world and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*'s reflection on celebrity culture can be seen to be connected to Rushdie's own experience of exile, notoriety and public scrutiny.
- **Historical context** – the novel is haunted by the death of Princess Diana, the Princess of Wales, who was killed in a traffic accident in Paris in August 1997. Rushdie has stated that he was interested in the media interest surrounding Diana's death and the ways in which her final months were dominated by intense press scrutiny and the invasive efforts of press photographers – the paparazzi – to obtain salacious images of her. The scrutiny surrounding Vina Aspara in the novel and its destructive effect on her mental health and relationships is an echo of these concerns.
- **Literary context** – the novel is a reworking of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which is famously recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. When Eurydice is killed by a snake, her husband Orpheus plays a song on his lyre that is so sorrowful that it moves everything living in the world. Orpheus follows his wife into the underworld, Hades, where he presents himself to the God of the Underworld, named Pluto, and his wife Persephone. So moved is he by Orpheus and his playing that Pluto tells Orpheus that he can leave with his wife but that if he turns to look at her as she follows him out of the underworld, he will lose her forever. As he leaves the cave, Orpheus begins to believe that the gods have tricked him, he turns around, loses his wife and is never able to return to the Underworld again.

Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on Rushdie's work. It is recommended that students use a search engine in an academic library to access these journals. Other sources include:

- Lawrence Phillips: *Gale Researcher Guide for the Magical Realism of Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie* (Online Publication: Gale Cengage, 2018)
- Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, *Salman Rushdie: The Essential Guide* (London: Vintage, 2012)
- Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1992)
- Andrew Teverson, *Salman Rushdie* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- Other Salman Rushdie novels. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is set in India and concerns the story of Saleem Sinai, a boy born at the moment of Indian national independence and who is imbued with magical powers. Like *Ground Beneath Her Feet*, it is concerned about questions of national identity and belonging. Similar themes are also explored in Rushdie's later novels, including *Shame* (set in Pakistan) and *Fury* (set in the United States).
- *Untold Story* – Monica Ali. Ali's novel takes as its theme the story of Princess Diana, sharing with Rushdie's novel an interest in the centrality of Diana to the British imagination. Ali imagines what would have happened if Diana had not died but had, instead, staged her own death and relocated to the United States. Like *Ground Beneath Her Feet,* the novel examines the damaging effects of celebrity and the media cultures that surround it and humanises those who are subject to invasive media representation.
- *England, England* – Julian Barnes. Rushdie's use of parallel worlds is interestingly compared with Barnes' satire of Englishness in his novel, which imagines a world in which England has been reinvented as a theme-park attraction. Sharing Rushdie's interest in the postmodern form, the novel ironises notions of national identity and questions the concepts of authentic history and truth.
- *Anansi Boys* – Neil Gaiman. Like Rushdie's novel, Gaiman's magical realist story evokes myth in order to explore questions of cultural identity. Gaiman uses the Caribbean folktale of the spider god Anansi and relocates the story to London. The novel can be compared to Rushdie's in terms of its parallels between migrant identity and magical, surrealist events, which reflect lives often dominated by trauma and questions around identity.
- *Transmission* – Hari Kunzru. The story of Arjun, an Indian computer programmer working in the United States, Kunzru's novel is a critique of globalisation and the ways in which it obscures the suffering of low-paid migrants, fuelling the global economy. Richly satirical, the novel shares Rushdie's hyperbolic style and is comparable in terms of the focus on the fortunes of migrants drawn into a global culture.

5) *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali (2003)

Monica Ali's debut novel, *Brick Lane*, tells the story of Nazneen, who comes to London in the 1980s from Bangladesh and lives in East London with her husband Chanu and their two daughters. At the beginning of the novel, Nazneen is socially isolated in the couple's London flat, and the novel traces her gradual emergence from the restriction of her home and her stifling relationship with her patriarchal husband, towards independence. While Chanu becomes increasingly disillusioned by his prospects in Britain, Nazneen works as a seamstress to support the family and finds herself dreaming of more independence. When the couple lose their baby son, Nazneen becomes depressed, and the relationship deteriorates further. She develops a friendship with another young woman, Razia, who embraces Britishness and encourages Nazneen to challenge Chanu. Nazneen begins a relationship with a young British Muslim man, Karim, who has become radicalised after 9/11. The relationship falters when Nazneen realises that Karim is an expression of her own desire for change but is not someone with whom she wants to spend her life. When Chanu declares that he is returning to Bangladesh and wants to take the children and Nazneen with him, she chooses to remain in London. The novel ends with her setting up a new sewing business with Razia, ice-skating in a sari and declaring 'This is England… you can do whatever you like'.

Key themes of the novel

- **Religious belief** – *Brick Lane* is set, in part, after the events of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States on September 11th 2001. It examines how Islamophobia in Britain, in the wake of the attacks, drives some young British Muslims towards more radical belief. Nazneen's personal but equally strong religious belief is contrasted by the public expressions of religious identity of her lover, Karim, and other young people in the novel. They present different facets of engagement with Islam and prompt questions regarding the relationship between religion and politics in British society.
- **Gender** – *Brick Lane* updates the classic migration narrative by exploring it through the lens of gender. Nazneen's experience is defined at the beginning of the novel by her social isolation and exclusion from wider British society. As the novel goes on, Nazneen moves out into the London streets, begins a career and establishes the foundation for her independence. Her struggle in doing so comes in the wake of patriarchal structures in the migrant community but also shows the support of other women, such as Razia, who provide alternative models of belonging.
- **Generational difference** – Nazneen's feelings of social isolation are contrasted with the experience of her two young daughters, who embody the confidence of a British Asian generation born in Britain. The novel complicates this representation, however, through the character of Nazneen's lover, Karim, who feels alienated in Britain in the wake of 9/11 and becomes increasingly involved in more radical religious belief.

- **The city** – the novel is framed by its setting in Brick Lane, East London. It was controversial because some members of a particular group of Bangladeshi Muslims, the Sylheti community, were critical of the way in which they were represented in the novel. This criticism was reinforced by those who pointed out that Ali was not a member of the Brick Lane community she writes about. Ali defended her work by pointing out that the criticisms come through the character of Chanu, who is not to be seen as a reliable voice.

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- **Migration** – through both Chanu and Nazneen, the novel examines the experience of migration to Britain. Chanu's life is characterised by disillusionment that his life in Britain has failed to provide him with the success he imagined. Nazneen's life in Britain is interspersed with the letters she writes to her sister, who has remained in Bangladesh. The uncertain fate of her sister contrasts Chanu's pessimism with an awareness of the opportunities offered by migration, particularly for women.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Realism** – the novel is essentially realist, with an ending, however, that gestures towards optimistic, or even utopian, thinking. This strategy allows Ali to engage with the social reality of British Muslim women in London but also to gesture towards a future Britain, with differing relations to the migrant community.
- **Epistolary** – letter writing is a central part of the novel. Nazneen's letters to her sister examine the alternative possible life for Nazneen if she had not come to Britain. Through this comparison, the novel illustrates the global nature of patriarchal structures but also the ways in which the experience of migration ultimately allows Nazneen to create a future for herself that is not possible for her sister.
- **Humour** – Chanu is a subject of humour in the novel; this comedy is often bittersweet and emphasises the difficult position for the migrant attempting to reconcile the reality of their lives with their hopes and aspirations. It is this humour that was disregarded by critics of the novel, who instead saw Chanu's prejudices as reflective of the text's own standpoint.

Context

- **Reception context** – the novel was controversial on its publication because of its representation of the Sylheti community. When a film version of the novel was produced, these complaints intensified. A group was formed called 'Campaign Against Monica Ali's Film *Brick Lane'*. There were threats to burn copies of the book and, acting on police advice, the shooting of the film was relocated from East London to other sites. The reaction to the novel in this respect resurrected debates regarding freedom of speech and representations of migrant communities first brought to light with the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in 1988.
- **Historical context** – the novel was published in 2003. It is wide ranging in its historical context, however, extending from the 1980s to a period contemporary with its publication. The 1980s were notable for the rise in female Asian migrants, who were often brought to Britain as wives of men who first came to the UK during the mass migration of the 1970s. The novel's later context is most notable for its

reference to the events of 9/11, and the novel examines the hostile treatment of Muslims in Britain in the wake of the attacks.

- **Author context** – some of the criticism of *Brick Lane* was directed at Ali herself and her own background as a writer from outside the Sylheti and East London community. Ali was born in Bangladesh to a Bangladeshi father and English mother, and the family moved to Bolton in Lancashire when Ali was three years old, she later lived in South London. Criticised by the feminist Germaine Greer for her 'inauthenticity', Ali was defended by other writers, including Salman Rushdie. This reception raises questions on the 'burden of representation' placed on ethnic authors to write about what they know and to speak with an awareness of the communities they represent, which might not equally be placed on white writers.

Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on *Brick Lane*. It is recommended that students use an academic library search engine to access these journals. Other sources include:

- Mario Cacciottolo, 'Brick Lane Protesters Hurt Over Lies', *BBC News*, 31 July 2006 news report
- Yasmin Hussain, *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity - Studies in Migration and Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2016)
- Harriet Lane, 'Ali's in Wonderland', *The Guardian*, June 1 2003 newspaper article
- Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2011), Chapter 6, Monica Ali.

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- *Disobedience* – Naomi Alderman. Alderman's novel is a story of same-sex attraction in the context of the Orthodox Jewish community in North London. Nazneen's struggle to reconcile her behaviour with Karim, with her strong religious belief and her desire to maintain that belief, can be compared to Alderman's protagonist, who is the daughter of a rabbi.
- *The Enigma of Arrival* – V S Naipaul. Like *Brick Lane*, Naipaul's novel explores the complex feelings that surround migration. The novel's unnamed narrator, who in many ways, is based on Naipaul himself, recounts his experiences living in a countryside estate in Britain. Disconnected from the country of his birth but also from the Englishness with which he is surrounded, the novel is a melancholy lament on the loss and loneliness that accompanies some migrant experiences.
- *The Satanic Verses* – Salman Rushdie. The controversy surrounding *Brick Lane* was second in its virulence only to the furore surrounding *The Satanic Verses*. It is useful to compare why these novels were so controversial and what these controversies tell us about the relationship between fiction and questions of minority racial or ethnic identity. In both cases, the elements of the novels that have been criticised are not straightforwardly the voice of their narrator or of a voice with which one is encouraged to identify. We can ask how this narrative strategy shapes the overall representation and with what consequences.

- *White Teeth* – Zadie Smith. Smith's novel also addresses the question of British Asian youth identities and their relationship to extremist discourse. While Karim is radicalised in the wake of 9/11, Smith's characters are caught up in controversy surrounding *The Satanic Verses*. In both novels, this attachment to religious discourse is identified as existing in a complex relationship to the culturally hybrid lifestyles and attitudes of those who adopt it.

6) *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Nadeem Aslam (2004)

Maps for Lost Lovers is the second novel by Nadeem Aslam, who was born in Pakistan in 1966 and came to Britain with his parents at the age of 14, where the family settled in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. The novel focuses on a Muslim 'honour killing' in a small, isolated British town. Two lovers, Chanda and Jugnu, are violently killed by Chanda's brothers because of an unsanctioned sexual relationship.

At the opening of the novel, we learn of the disappearance of Chanda and Jugnu. Chanda has been divorced twice and abandoned by her third husband; she has been living with Jugnu who is older than her, and works as a naturalist studying butterflies. Because Jungu and Chanda are not married their co-habitation is against Islamic law.

Chanda's brothers are arrested on suspicion of her murder but there is no evidence and the two lovers' bodies cannot be found. As the community debates what has happened, the novel focuses on one of the brothers, Shamas, who is sympathetic in his views but is contrasted with his wife, Kaukab, who is strongly critical of the lovers. It is revealed that while Kaukab has been raising their children through her strict interpretation of Islam, Shamas has been having a relationship with another woman who he meets through his work as a shopkeeper. Shamas and Kuakab separate as a result of the affair but then reconcile. Kaukab struggles to maintain control of her children, who frequently turn towards western culture; she fights with her daughter and is physically abusive towards her. Meanwhile, Shamas reveals the stories of the community, which include the abusive treatment of young women, who are subject to both physical and sexual violence.

The final section of the novel reveals the reality of what happened to both Chanda and Jugnu, through their own experiences and through the brothers' confessions. We learn that Chanda had refused to wear the *burka*, that Kaukab had attempted to get Chanda's ex-husband to release her from their marriage and that the lovers were brutally murdered – Jugnu beaten to death, Chanda's neck broken and her body burned. The novel ends with Shamas, who sees his lover, who is now married, and notices that she is pregnant, and with the young boy who was employed by Chanda's family to impersonate Jugnu, wandering alone in the snow.

Key themes of the novel

- **Religious belief** – the novel is concerned with the tensions between strong Muslim values and liberal British society. The novel's representation of those who commit the honour killing, resonates with representations in the popular media of Islamic fundamentalism and the novel is filled with other negative representation of Islamic belief that echo this. The strength of Aslam's critique of Islam and the lack of a positive representation of religious belief in the novel could be seen by some readers to be as a reaction to the events of 9/11 and indeed the writer has said 'I asked myself whether in my personal life and as a writer I had been rigorous enough to condemn the small scale September 11s that go on every day… Jugnu and Chanda are the September 11 of this book'.

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- **Gender** – at the centre of the novel's honour killing is a concern for how women are potentially positioned by some sectors of the Muslim community. The character of Kaukab suggests that patriarchal values are held not only by male members of Muslim culture but that they are more broadly propagated through a particular cultural interpretation of Islam. The violence against Chanda is without mercy and is undertaken by those who should love her most. Through this, the novel emphasises how some kinds of religious feeling can overtake compassion and empathy in ways that are deeply damaging for women.

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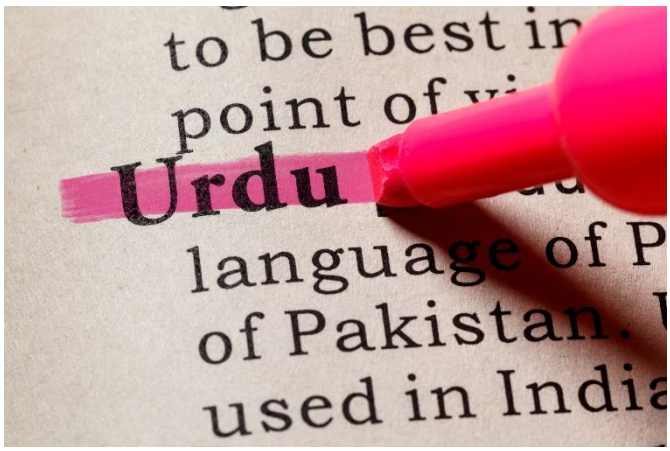
- **Regional identities** – *Maps* draws attention to the ways in which attitudes to Britishness need to be contextualised by local and regional identities. The setting of *Maps* is a small, unnamed, British town, where 'white-flight' has led to the formation of an entirely Muslim enclave. The inhabitants describe the town as 'Dasht-e-Tanhaii', which means 'Desert of Loneliness'. In this space there is little opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue and the novel suggests that it is this cultural isolation that leads to violence. Therefore, it is not just religion that is criticised in the novel, but also the social and political realities of contemporary Britain, which allow extreme religious thinking to grow in the context of deprivation and exclusion.
- **Cultural hybridity** – the novel juxtaposes in stark contrast characters who have embraced western values and those who refuse diversity. Kaukab, for example, has strained relationships with all of her children because of her traditional beliefs, which are challenged by their hybrid identities. In contrast, her husband Shamas, who has moved away from strong religious feeling, is presented as kind and generous. Here again, the novel is firmly ideological in its suggestion that the failure to embrace diversity is deeply problematic.
- **British Asian community** – *Maps* marks a change from earlier British Asian fiction in that it is focused solely on the British Muslim community and does not concern itself directly with white racism or white culture. Aslam has said in this respect that he writes 'not want[ing] to give the impression – which most novels about immigration give – that interaction with the often-hostile whites was all there was to an immigrant's life.'

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Urdu influence** – the novel is influenced by the *Masnavi,* the Urdu novel in verse form. Aslam's poetic language is taken from this form and captures the epic tragedy he constructs, but jars with the novel's brutal and violent subject matter. This juxtaposition captures the complex cultural positioning of the characters, who are often simultaneously thoughtful and without empathy. The novel's themes are also influenced by the *Masnavi,* which often focuses on lovers and tales of romance. The novel shares with earlier Urdu tales a similar concern for the tensions between the relentless pace of change in modern society and religious values.



- **Metaphor** – a specific focus of the novel's ornate language is a use of metaphor. This metaphor enhances the novel's emotive content, for example the death of the lovers is framed by ''the sky turning the blood-red of anemones in the east'.
- **Linguistic comparison** – Aslam uses the contrast between Urdu and English to explore cultural attitudes and their differences. Kaukab, for example, thinks in onomatopoeic phrases attached to her home in Pakistan – 'the train said "choo cho" instead of "*chuk chuk*"' and this illustrates her separation from British culture.

Context

- **Historical context** – although the novel makes no direct reference to 9/11, its events are influenced by media discourse surrounding Islam in the wake of these events. In Aslam's bleak vision, British Muslims are no longer part of the Asian diaspora in Britain but are a separate group who are alienated and disenfranchised. Aslam focusing not on racism but rather on the need for the British Muslim community to address the issues of fundamentalism, is largely in line with post-9/11 discussion in the general media but also in parts of the British Muslim community itself. With no focus on either the misguided morality driving the brothers, or their disassociation from the true teachings of Islam, the characters are not so much individuals as representative of a particular attitude to religious faith. This echoes the way in which media discourse chose, post 9/11, to identify the crimes' perpetrators as representative of Islam, rather than as misguided, socially alienated, or manipulated individuals.
- **Socio-political context** – the novel is contextualised by a debate surrounding the treatment of women in Islam in the UK. A 2009 report by Civitas identified at least 85 Sharia councils in Britain, designed to arbitrate on the implementation of Sharia law, including marriage and divorce. It also reflects wider media reporting of the rise of exclusive religious communities in Britain, for example the increasing popularity of Islamic schools.
- **Author's life** – Aslam grew up in Pakistan and his novel carries with it the influence of the Urdu literature he read growing up, as well as his knowledge of the Urdu language, alongside western influences. The epic nature of the novel is echoed in Aslam's experience of writing it, which he has said took him ten years.

Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on Aslam's work. It is recommended that students use a search engine in an academic library to access these journals. Other sources include:

- Nadeem Aslam: A Question of Honour', *The Independent*, 11 June 2004, newspaper article
- Madeline Clements, *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective: Rushdie, Hamid, Aslam and Shamsie* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015)
- Peter Childs and James Green, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Twenty-First Century British Novels: Zadie Smith, Nadeem Aslam, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Chapter 2
- Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2011), Chapter 6.

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- *Minaret* – Leila Aboulela. Aboulela's novel offers a contrasting view of Islam as a source of support and healing for a young Muslim woman. The novel focuses on the strength of female Muslim community, as its central character, Najwa, arrives in London after fleeing the Sudanese Civil War. For Najwa, the mosque is a place of healing and respite from her trauma.
- *The Scarlet Letter* – Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne's 19th-century American novel is a striking contrast in terms of its setting and period. Yet the story it tells, of a young woman, Hester Prynne, and her shaming for having a child outside of marriage in Puritan America, compares with the judgement Chanda faces in *Maps*.
- *The Black Album* – Hanif Kureishi. Kureishi's novel tells the story of Shahid, a British Muslim, and his experiences at university when he becomes involved simultaneously with a group of young men with strong religious beliefs and a female tutor who encourages him to embrace a liberal and sexually experimental lifestyle. Like *Maps*, the novel explores the contrasts between competing world views and the difficulties for young British Asians navigating them, while presenting a critical view of strict religious adherence.
- *The Satanic Verses* – Salman Rushdie. Rushdie's infamous novel also examines Muslim belief alongside a concern for British Asian identity. The story of two migrants, Saladin and Gibreel, the novel focuses on the British-born Asian generation and their lives in London, and uses religious discourse to examine how Muslim belief structures intertwine with other cultural influences in contemporary culture. Accused of blasphemy for its representation of the Prophet Muhammad's wives, the novel shares with *Maps* a critical attitude to strict religious belief.

7) *Londonstani*, Gautam Malkani (2006)

The novel is narrated by a young man known as Jas, and Part One begins with him and three of his friends, Amit, Hardjit and Ravi, involved in a violent racist incident. The early parts of the novel follow them around their local area of Hounslow in west London, where they live in affluent, middle-class households, and introduces us to the Sikh culture that infuses their way of life. The boys get involved in an illegal phone-unlocking business, working with a man called Davinder. When Hardjit gets into a dispute with a young Muslim called Tariq, a fight is arranged. When it is interrupted by the police, the boys' former history teacher, Mr Ashwood, steps in to prevent them being arrested. When they return with him to the school, however, he reveals that he knows they tried to steal his mobile phone, and makes a deal with them that he will not report them to the police if they come and study with him. The boys reluctantly agree.

Part Two of the novel skips forward several months. Jas asks out a girl, called Samira, he has been attracted to and is connected up with a man called Sanjay, who he has been introduced to by Mr Ashwood. At Sanjay's flat, the boys meet Bobby, his security officer, and are offered a deal by Sanjay to deliver the mobile phones to him for sale. Davinder becomes their supplier. On their first two dates, Jas takes Samira to exclusive restaurants and clubs organised by Sanjay and she is impressed. Meanwhile, Amit's brother Arun is struggling to organise his wedding and turns to Jas for advice in dealing with his difficult mother. Jas encourages him to stand up to her but this ends in an explosive argument.

The final part of the novel begins with the revelation that Arun has committed suicide and Jas worrying about whether he will get in trouble for dating Samira because she is Muslim. They argue over Zahid, a boy she plays badminton with, and after Samira slaps him, she breaks off their relationship. Jas meets with Sanjay, who reveals that the other boys no longer want to supply him with phones after what happened with Arun and that he expects Jas to make up the shortfall of 200 phones in the next two days. He blackmails Jas with photos of sexual encounters with Samira and says that he must get the phones from Jas's dad's own warehouse, revealing that Mr Ashwood told him Jas's surname and that his father was a businessman. Sanjay explains that the stolen phones are never sold but that that they are part of a complex tax scam called VAT carousel fraud. While attempting to steal the phones, Jas is assaulted by three hooded men who we assume to be his three friends and when he regains consciousness sets fire to the warehouse. He ends up in hospital where he confesses everything to his mum and dad. Discussing how to stop him from going to jail, it is revealed that Jas's name is Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden and that his hospital chart reads 'white male'.

Key themes of the novel

- **The suburbs** – the novel is set in the west London suburb of Hounslow, on the outskirts of one of Britain's largest British Asian communities called Southall. It explores the contradictions between the 'urban' youth identities being performed by young men and the affluent realities of their lives in a middle-class area of London.

Southall Gurdwara *© MIGUEL MEDINA/Stringer/Getty Images*

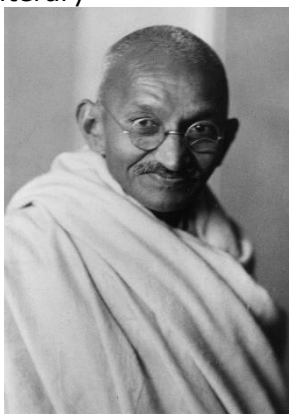
- **Performativity** – all of the identities in the novel are performed rather than inherent or authentic, and the novel presents Jas as simply the most extreme example of this behaviour. The term 'performativity' comes from Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*, which looks at how gendered identities are not inherent but are encouraged by society so that they come to appear natural over time through the way that they are repeatedly displayed in particular ways. In the novel, gender, race, class, and religion are all performed.
- **Post-ethnicity** – the novel's plot twist is designed to draw attention to the ways in which youth cultures no longer base themselves on straightforward racial or ethnic identification. Jas is able to integrate into a community because of his ability to perform stereotypical ethnic characteristics. On one hand, this seems to suggest a positive movement away from fixed identity categories. On the other, however, it reinforces cultures of belonging, which are firmly dictated by rules of performance and conformism.
- **Masculinity** – the young men in the novel perform ethnic identities but they also perform hyper-masculine identities rooted in violence and aggression. The novel explores how this violence is rooted in inter-ethnic conflict but also how it creates a powerful code for belonging.
- **Generational difference** – the young men in the novel are contrasted with their parents' generation. Ironically, the young men are much more regimented in their belief systems and cultural reference points. The novel ironises this by illustrating how the young men have little sense of the meaning behind the traditions they perform but also exposes how this behaviour represents an attempt to find meaning in the wake of alienation caused by continuing racism in British culture.
- **Capitalism** – alongside the pressures of ethnic community and masculinity, the young men in the novel are shaped profoundly by capitalist culture, where reputation and status is connected to wealth. This affluence is manifested in designer clothing and mobile phones, and the novel parallels this inauthentic and superficial culture with the performative nature of their ethnic and gender identities.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Realism** – the novel makes detailed reference to real landmarks in its west London setting, including schools, parks, high streets and bus routes. This realism adds to the novel's sense of a distinct British Asian youth culture, which is highly particular to a specific area of London.
- **Dialect** – Malkani makes extensive use of urban street dialect. The novel ironises this by making readers aware that this way of speaking is a mimicry of inner-city, black dialect that is neither natural to the boys nor shared with their parents. Here, it is part of a performance of hyper-masculine ethnic identity. Yet there are also subtleties to each performance – each of the young men has his own version of street style that relates to his character. Malkani, therefore, identifies the powerful connection that exists between language and identity.
- **Plot twist** – the novel's final twist illuminates the themes of post-ethnicity and performance that are evident in the novel throughout. Jas is a heightened representation of the performative nature of identity throughout the novel, and an example of a complex rendering of hybrid, multicultural identity in which ethnic identification has been replaced by other equally destructive and equally narrow forms of identification, based on cultural reference points, street credibility and class.

Context

- **Author context** – Malkani began the novel as his dissertation project while a student at the University of Cambridge. This academic background informs the novel's concern for cultures of hyper-masculinity and their relationship to ethnic identity. Alongside the events of the novel, the characters engage in dialogues that play out the themes that Malkani explored during his studies.
- **Social context** – *Londonstani* is informed by debates surrounding sociological concepts pertaining to the idea of the 'generation gap' between young British Asians and their migrant parents, and also the concept of 'caught between cultures' that has been used to describe British Asian youth. Through the character of Jas, Malkani problematises the association of these terms specifically with British Asian culture and asks readers to consider the broader contemporary culture in which such identities are produced.
- **Cultural context** – Malkani writes against a history of media and literary representations that have traditionally represented Asian males stereotypically as subservient and passive. These stereotypes originate in colonial discourse and the ways in which Asian men were often forced into indentured labour, which was a kind of paid slavery. They continue in the 20th century in the evocation of the Indian politician Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi, who led India's claim for independence from the British Empire, was associated with the notion of peaceful resistance and non-violence. This idea of the Indian male filtered into the popular imagination and the British cultural imaginary of Asian masculinity. Malkani explores how male British Asian youth identities are created against this stereotype.



Critical interpretations

It is recommended that students use a search engine in an academic library to access journal articles that explore questions of masculinity and youth identities in British Asian literature, as well as essays specifically on *Londonstani*. Other sources include:

- James Graham, 'An Interview with Gautam Malkani', Literary London Journal 6.1 (2008) –writer interview
- Michael Perfect, *Contemporary Fictions of Multiculturalism* (London: Palgrave, 2014)

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- *Some Kind of Black* – Diran Adebayo. Like *Londonstani*, Adebayo's novel focuses on the intersection of education and youth culture, and its bearings on questions of race and masculinity. The central character, Dele, is a student at the University of Oxford, attempting to identify himself within the contrasts between this world and his home in London.
- The Scholar – Courttia Newland. Set in west London, Newland's novel examines how two young cousins of Afro-Caribbean background shape their identities in the context of racism and peer pressure. They struggle to resist a strongly masculine gang culture that is driven by violent crime and, like Londonstani, the novel serves as a corrective to celebratory accounts of multiculturalism, with a strong awareness of continuing prejudice.
- *Psychoraag* – Suhayl Saadi. Saadi's novel is an ambitious and experimental prose work that examines Scottish Asian youth culture. Like *Londonstani*, it is infused by popular culture references and linguistically innovative. It makes extensive reference to music in particular, which informs its sense of a distinct contemporary moment.

- *Trainspotting* – Irvine Welsh. Welsh's novel is the classic tale of male youth rebellion. A gritty and hard-hitting text, it is written entirely in Scots dialect and features explicit representations of sex, violence and drug taking. It shares with *Londonstani* a concern for hyper-masculine youth cultures and their damaging consequences, played out through the relationships between young men. Like *Londonstani*, the novel's main character, Renton, is not as marginalised as his assumed identity at first suggests.

8) *The Year of the Runaways*, Sunjeev Sahota (2015)

The Year of the Runaways interweaves the stories of three young male Asian migrants in Britain with the story of Narinder, a young British Asian woman who comes to have a powerful effect on their lives. At the beginning of the novel, Randeep is in a fake marriage to Narinder in order to obtain a visa to stay in the UK. He is engaged in low-paid labour alongside Avtar, who is in the UK on a student visa, and Tarlochan. Through flashback, we learn that Tarlochan has lost all his family, who are brutally murdered in Bihar, where he lived a life as an untouchable from a lower caste. Avtar has come to the UK in order to secure an education and return to marry his girlfriend, called Lakhpreet, owing money to a group of people smugglers. Randeep has also left India, in order to secure money that he can send home to his mother and disabled father, carrying the guilty secret of his expulsion from college for sexual assault. Meanwhile, Narinder has agreed to marry Randeep in order to atone for the suicide of a young man who asked her to enter into a visa marriage and who she refused. Alienated from her strict father and brother, she is engaged to another man and has promised to marry him in a year's time.

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After Randeep seriously injures another worker, Gurpreet, in a fight, he and Avtar leave Narinder's apartment where they have been staying. When Avtar and Randeep are separated, Randeep finds himself homeless. Narinder, meanwhile, gets a job, but then is abducted by her brother and returned home before she can take up the position. When immigration officers threaten to expose the fake marriage, Narinder goes on a desperate hunt to find Randeep. Randeep and Avtar move back into her apartment, with Avtar increasingly unwell as a result of an operation to remove a kidney he sold. Narinder begins a tentative relationship with Tarlochan, who has moved into the apartment downstairs after his past has been exposed by the family of a girl he was introduced to as a potential wife, but Narinder tells him that she cannot stay with him because she has promised to return to her father. When Avtar gets in a fight with Tarlochan, he ends up seriously ill and in hospital. Randeep begins his divorce proceedings to secure his visa, and Tarlochan leaves for Spain. The novel's epilogue reveals that Avtar and Randeep are both living in Sheffield; Avtar is married to Lakhpreet, while Randeep lives alone in a small studio flat, working as an assistant manager. Narinder never marries but many years later goes to the place that Tarlochan once told her about and sees that he is there, happily married with three children. She leaves without them meeting.

Key themes of the novel

- **Gender** – through the character of Narinder, the novel examines how women in British Asian communities are potentially subject to scrutiny and control. Although Narinder is British, she has less freedom of movement than the migrants with whom she finds herself in the company. Her devotion to her father sees her give up her relationship with Tarlochan and she never marries. She does, however, assert her independence by refusing her brother's and father's plans for her, and working.

Ultimately, she can be seen to shape her own destiny and the novel suggests that making what may be deemed conservative choices regarding family can be freely chosen as well as enforced.

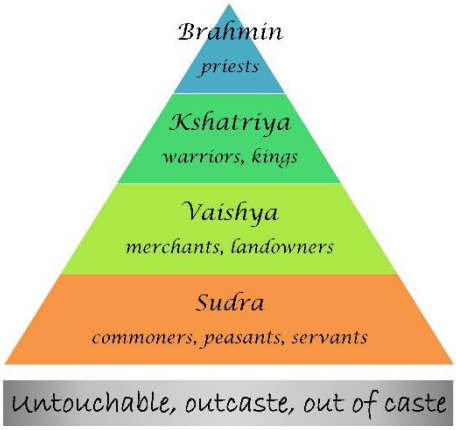
- **Migration** – the novel is largely focused on the experience of migrants to Britain and the inequalities faced by those living on the margins of legal residence in the UK. In particular, the novel examines how the migrant community is economically exploited for financial gain by those with British citizenship. By humanising narratives of migration frequently reported in the press via statistics and nameless images, the novel prompts readers to consider the injustice and suffering that shapes the experiences of those who want to improve their own lives and those of their families.
- **Family conflict** – Narinder and the migrant characters share complex relationships with their families, who are often sources of powerful emotions. Both love and shame feature in these relationships, which form powerful motivation for all the characters. There is no straightforward generational line drawn in the novel, with Narinder's brother being more critical of her behaviour than her father. The need, however, to please parents and meet familial expectations is a strong theme in the novel.
- **Desire** – each character provides an alternative narrative of love and sexual desire. Tarlochan is excluded by his caste, yet at the end of the novel is happily married. Avtar's desire for Lakhpreet is a central part of his travel to the UK and challenges stereotypes of sexual abstinence in the Indian community. Randeep leaves after his attempted rape of a girl to whom he is attracted. Narinder, ultimately, chooses love of family over her desire for Tarlochan and at the end of the novel we learn has rejected marriage. These differing experiences ask the reader to consider how love is shaped by cultural and personal experiences, and its implication in the politics of migrant and British Asian experience.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Analepsis (flashback)** – the novel frequently moves back to give the reader the backstories of its central characters. Doing so allows the novel to illuminate the motivations of the central characters and to provide a contrast between their lives in England and in India.
- **Epilogue** – the novel makes use of epilogue to update the narrative. Its poignant ending emphasises the possibility for change as Narinder does not marry and Tarlochan finds acceptance. This may surprise the reader, as it contradicts both how Tarlochan has been treated for much of the novel and how Narinder appears in her relationship to her family and the notion of marriage.
- **Polyglossia** – the novel makes use of Hindi terms in order to enrich the sense of an Indian migrant culture which exists hidden from mainstream British life. These words draw attention to the status of the young men as outsiders, whose alternative experiences and world views are captured in their language. It also, however, points to the diversity of Britishness which is no longer synonymous with English.
- **Realism** – the novel is starkly realistic. This adds to the novel's serious tone and reflects its bleak subject matter. Through detailed description and attention to dialogue, readers are given a picture of two starkly contrasting but equally horrific worlds.

Context

- **Social context** – Tarlochan's story centres on questions of caste, which is a rigid system of class classification. Tochi is a 'Chamaar', which is one of the 'untouchable' castes. Untouchables were seen traditionally in India as outside of the recognised populations in the Hindu ritual ranking system, called varna. The four varna range from priests and scholars to labourers, and to be outside of the system is, in traditional Hindu culture, to be an outcast, prevented from marrying into varna or being served, employed, or socialised with. Although untouchability is now outlawed in India, prejudice remains, and we see this in the novel where Tarlochan is exposed in Britain and rejected for marriage because of his caste.



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- **Economic context** – all the men in the novel are involved in low-paid, unrecognised work without legal rights. These activities are sometimes referred to as part of the black or underground market, both words that refer to illegal financial activities that exploit migrant workers. The novel complicates this when Narinder is also employed secretly but for positive effect. It is estimated that the underground economy makes up around 7% of the UK's GDP, which is a measure of overall financial productivity.
- **Author context** – Sahota lives in Sheffield, which is where much of the novel is set. He has said that the novel is a classic account of social realism and that it is based on his knowledge of the migrant communities in Sheffield, where he was aware of multiple occupancy housing and illegal working practices. His maternal grandmother still lives in India and he drew from conversations he witnessed there on schemes to facilitate migration. The story of Randeep's homelessness is based on a real story he encountered about the treatment of the homeless by a Hindu temple.


Sheffield ©Shutterstock

Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on Sahota's work. It is recommended that students use a search engine in an academic library to access these journals. Other sources include:

- Monica Cantieni and Sunjeev Sahota at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, October 2015 - writer interview
- Andrew McMillan, 'Sunjeev Sahota Interview: Rise and Rise of the Man Booker Shortlisted Author', *The Independent*, Friday 25th September 2015, - newspaper article
- Katy Shaw, 'Living by the Pen: In Conversation with Sunjeev Sahota', *English: Journal of the English Association*, Volume 66, Issue 254, Autumn 2017, pages 263–271 – journal article.

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- Other Sunjeev Sahota novels – *Ours are the Streets*, Sahota's first novel, is also set in Sheffield and tells the story of a young British Asian man who turns to radical Islam and plans a suicide bombing. Like *Year of the Runaways*, the novel explores social exclusion and deprivation in British Asian communities and, particularly, the effect on young men. It is stylistically very different to Sahota's second novel, and indicates how the novelist has utilised form specifically in the service of his thematic interests.
- *Capital* – John Lanchester. Following the fortunes of a series of individuals in contemporary London, Lanchester's novel examines the stark divides in wealth in a city where the highest earners and the very poorest often live side by side. With a cast of characters, including several migrants, the novel shares with *Year of the Runaways* a concern for the complex and multiple lives of those arriving to make their lives in the UK.
- *The Satanic Verses* – Salman Rushdie. Alongside its controversial plot concerning Islam, Rushdie's novel is also a powerful portrayal of two male Indian migrants attempting to find belonging in 1980s London during a period of intense racism and prejudice. Gibreel and Chamcha both find very different fortunes in London and, like the characters in Sahota's novel, their fates intertwine. A magical realist novel filled with fantasy, it provides stark contrast to Sahota's social realism, although it also features a similar use of different timeframes and a gritty representation of contemporary Britain.
- *The Lonely Londoners* – Sam Selvon. Selvon's classic tale of the lives of Afro-Caribbean migrants in 1950s London explores how men arriving in Britain were treated and the challenges they faced in terms of employment and housing. A much more comic tale than *Ours are the Streets*, it examines how young men survived the hardships of starting a life in a new country through their humour and resilience. As an earlier text, it provides an interesting comparison in terms of the universal prejudices against migrants but also historically specific experiences.

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9) *Home Fire*, Kamila Shamshie (2017)

Home Fire tells the present-day story of Aneeka, Isma and Parvaiz, three siblings who live together in North London. Anneka and Parvaiz are twins and their older sister, Isma, has cared for them since the death of their mother when they were 12. Their father died after leaving the family home to fight in Bosnia and being transported to the United States' terrorist detainee facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

At the beginning of the novel, Isma has gone to study in the United States. While there, she begins a friendship with Eamonn, a young man of mixed British Asian/white background whose father is Home Secretary. Eamonn's father was a local member of parliament when Isma's father went missing but distanced himself from the case, and from his Muslim background more generally, as part of his political-career manoeuvring. When Eamonn returns to London, he goes to visit Aneeka and they begin a secret relationship. Eamonn proposes and Aneeka reveals that she began the relationship in order to ask Eamonn to help Parvaiz return to London, who has travelled to Turkey to fight with Islamic fighters. Eamonn goes to visit his father, who refuses to help and locks him in the house. Parvaiz is killed in Turkey while trying to reach the British consulate, and Aneeka travels to be with his body, which Eamonn's father has refused to allow back into Britain. The novel ends dramatically with Isma attempting to get to Turkey and Eamonn flying out to be with Aneeka. He is attacked by terrorists who attach a suicide bomb to him and he and Aneeka die in each other's arms.

Key themes of the novel

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- **Religious radicalism** – the novel examines Parvaiz's radicalisation by terrorists and explores how this is rooted in his own disaffection, the loss of his father, and the false promises given to him by the terrorist community. Parvaiz is presented as driven not by religious fervour but by a need for belonging and a naivety that causes him to trust the people who recruit him. The novel therefore complicates media reporting of religious radicalism and attempts to humanise and understand those figures often presented simplistically in the media.

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- **Media discourse** – the novel illustrates how the reporting of Parvaiz's actions and his death are sensationalised by the media, reported by tabloid newspapers that stereotype his behaviour and create a scandal out of Aneeka's relationship with Eamonn. The difference between the media reporting and the actual events as recounted in the novel examine how public perceptions are shaped by narratives designed to create emotional responses that may not do justice to the complexities of real events.
- **Gender** – Isma and Aneeka present two contrasting models of British Asian female identity. Isma is conservative and modest, while Aneeka is outwardly modest but secretly sexually adventurous. Both Isma and Aneeka are committed Muslims, and

the novel examines how these two differing models both embrace religious belief. The novel therefore challenges the stereotyping of Muslim faith with particular kinds of gendered behaviours. When Parvaiz is radicalised, he is inducted into a culture that objectifies and demeans women but the British press also do this when they report on Aneeka's involvement with Eamonn. Through these representations, the novel examines how Muslim women are subject to patriarchal cultures both within the Muslim community and in wider British society.

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- **Britishness** – Eamonn's father has achieved political success through rejecting his Muslim background and the novel explores how the notion of Britishness is entangled with religious perspective. When Parvaiz attempts to come home, and when his sisters try to secure his burial, he is subject to British laws that make terrorists stateless. These laws apply only to citizens with dual nationality who have parents born outside Britain, raising questions as to how the children of migrants are treated differently, despite their British nationality.

Literary features that shape meaning

- **Analepsis** – the novel employs flashback in order to explore the character's motivations for current events. We are presented with scenes from earlier in Isma, Aneeka and Parvaiz's lives, which examine how they have come to hold differing views regarding terrorism, particularly in relation to their father's death. These flashbacks develop each character and contribute to the novel's non-judgemental representation, acknowledging the complexity of each character's actions.
- **Point of view** – each section of the novel focuses on a different character and tells the story from their point of view. This allows the novel to present varying viewpoints with equal attention. A character such as Eamonn's father, who could become caricatured for example, is given space, which allows the reader to understand his motives. The creation of multiple complex characters means that the novel does not present a single view of the novel's central events, facilitating the development of the complex questions it raises about terrorism and its relationship to Britishness.
- **Stylistic variation** – the novel moves from a straightforward realist format in its early sections to the use of poetry, newspaper format and stream of consciousness in its later sections. These stylistic variations reflect the heightened emotional states of the characters as their fortunes become more precarious and also reflect the media discourses surrounding the reporting of terrorism.
- **Classical intertext** – the novel is a contemporary retelling of the Greek tragedy of *Antigone* by Sophocles. Shamsie adapts the character names and plot from Sophocles play, elevating her own narrative to the status of a tragedy and imbuing it with a sense of epic.

Context

- **International political context** – the novel examines the recruitment of young British men to terror organisations declaring affiliation with Islam and operating in Europe and the Middle East. The group in the novel is not named but they operate in Turkey, an area that has seen a number of attacks by the terror organisation ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). They are a jihadist group that has been

associated with al-Qaeda, the terrorist group that claimed responsibility for the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001.

- **Domestic political context** – the novel is informed by debates regarding the government plans to strip dual-nationality citizens of their rights if involved with terrorism. It makes use of the words of Shami Chakrabarti, who was director of the human rights group Liberty, and reflects the group's protest against these plans. In 2019, the high-profile case of Shamima Begum was reported, in which Shamima, who had joined ISIS, asked to return home with her baby son, having lost two children while involved with the terrorist organisation. Her request was refused and the Home Secretary declared his intention to revoke her Britishness on the grounds of her dual nationality. It was reported, subsequently, that her baby son had died.
- **Literary context** – the novel is informed by its intertextual relation to the Greek tragedy *Antigone*. In Sophocles' play, Antigone and Ismene are two sisters, whose brother Polynices, has died in the Theban War and who the new king Creon refuses to allow proper burial. Creon's son Haemon is engaged to Antigone and when she buries the body he attempts to persuade his father to pardon her crime. Ismene, who has asked to be tried with her sister, is spared but Antigone is condemned to death. Antigone kills herself and Haemon commits suicide in grief.

Antigone © DEA / BIBLIOTECA AMBROSIANA / Contributor/Getty Images

Critical interpretations

In academic journals, there are many critical essays that focus on literature and terrorism. It is recommended that students use a search engine in an academic library to access these journals. Other sources include:

- Kamila Shamsie interview 2017: Home Fire
- Daniel O'Gorman, *Fictions of the War on Terror: Difference and the Transnational 9/11 Novel*. London: Palgrave, 2015
- Vanessa Thorp, 'Kamila Shamsie interview: Being a UK Citizen Makes me Feel More Able to Take Part in the Conversation' – *The Guardian* 2017 – newspaper article.

Possible coursework pairings/other novels to consider

- *The Translator* – Leila Aboulela. Like *Home Fire*, *The Translator* is a love story that explores the relationship between religious faith and desire. It tells the story of a young Scottish Muslim woman and her relationship with a white Scottish man. As the two characters negotiate their relationship, readers are asked to consider how love can create new attitudes and behaviours, and challenge stereotypes.
- *Transmission* – Hari Kunzru. Kunzru's novel tells the story of Arjun, a computer programmer whose negative experience working for a US corporation leads him to create a computer virus, which sees him vilified in ways that exceed his crimes.

Reimagined by the media, Arjun also finds solace in romance. Like *Home Fire*, the novel interweaves an unusual love story with concern for ethnic alienation and the disillusionment caused by racism and prejudice.

- *Terrorist* – John Updike. American novelist, Updike, explores the life of Ahmad Alloy, an 18-year-old, mixed-race American Muslim. Like *Home Fire*, the novel explores the tragic consequences of alienation and radicalisation. However, it has also been subject to criticism for its stereotypical representation of Muslim men and makes an interesting contrast to Shamsie's narrative choices.
- *Once Upon a Time in England* – Helen Walsh. Set in northern England in the 1970s, Walsh's novel features a brother and sister whose lives take very different paths. With a white English father and a British Asian mother, the children's experiences of racism shape their lives profoundly. Like *Home Fire*, the novel examines the relationship between siblings and how family allegiances powerfully shape our experiences.

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