

THE FINE BORDER BETWEEN THE LABEL OF 'TERRORIST' AND BEING A VICTIM OF TERROR AND THE CALL OF THE MOTHER(LAND)

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Abstract

Tariq Mehmood is a Pakistani British writer and film-maker who grew up in Bradford with his grandfather while his mother and father stayed back in his country of origin, Pakistan. His personal experience as a 'Black'/Asian youth and as a founding member of an Afro-Asian organisation, the United Black Youth League, in the 1980s Britain includes racism and police oppression against immigrants, experience also reflected in his novel, Where There is Light (2003). Additionally, the writer and the main character, Saleem, was one of several Asian youths charged with conspiracy (known as 'the Bradford 12' case) who succeeded in being acquitted. This paper includes two sections. The first explores the political and social background of the novel in which the protagonist lives while it analyses the relationship between race relations and the immigration policies in Britain as a source of oppression and abuse that trigger reactions on the part of immigrants and/or non-white British interpreted as 'terrorism'. The second part emphasises the protagonist's complex relationship with the idea of mother and of motherland; the feeling of non-belonging and rejection not only keep Saleem away from his mother(land) but it also increases his inclination towards communism. Thus, the novel combines racism, youth immigrant identity crisis and the struggle of the working class as elements of a turbulent historical period that has been continuously updated until today.

Keywords: immigrant, race relations, police, fanaticism, terrorist, mother(land).

1. Introduction

Tariq Mehmood's novel *While There Is Light* (2003) is published in 2003 but it is a combination of personal experience/history (Saleem's) and events (actual history) that indeed took place both in Great Britain and in Pakistan, the two countries that serve as locations for the setting of the narrative. The author was born in 1956 and as a child migrated to Britain with his grandfather, a migration path followed by his main character as well. If the political and social attitude towards Asian immigrants in Britain was at the time rather during a *laissez-faire* period, politicians being "hesitant and ambiguous and little positive was done to assist their settlement, integration and acceptance" (Layton-Henry, in Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 63), it soon turned a different side, characterised by "overt racial antagonism" though 'at

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personal level, social mingling, especially between black men and white women, continued to flourish” (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 64).

Starting with the 1960s, the political arena turned towards a stronger control of immigrant inflow triggered by fears that the numbers of South Asian immigrants coming from the Commonwealth countries would increase significantly. Nonetheless, as it was understood later, the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill no longer treated Commonwealth citizens as ‘British subjects with equal rights of citizenship’ (id. 65), being in fact the instrument used to attain a target which was in real fact racial exclusion. As Alibhai-Brown quotes William Deedes, Minister without Portfolio at the time: “The Bill’s real purpose was to restrict the influx of coloured immigrants” (in Paul Rich, qtd. by Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 65). Despite the setting up of a Race Relations Board after the 1965 Race Relations Act which “outlawed discrimination in specified public places such as cinemas and transport facilities and made it illegal for anyone to publish and distribute written matter which deliberately stirred up racial hatred” (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 67), racism and discrimination towards non-white immigrants did not end. It is thought and demonstrated that the connection between race relations and immigration policies not only do not have a positive outcome in Britain, but also encourages white racism:

It may be that by aiming to appease white opinion by turning first to immigration rather than by tackling racism itself, the government has nourished and given legitimacy to anti-immigrant sentiment; thus the outcome of the appeasement policy may have been only a deepening of the racialist currents in British society. (Colin Brown, qtd. in Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 68)

The Ugandan crisis generated by Idi Amin’s expulsion of around 50,000 South Asians of whom many came to Britain was reason enough to create even more unrest and racism. The overt hostility towards immigrants displayed by the National Front, the Monday Club and the National Party was explained by the presence of a huge number of immigrants which was likely to increase, explanation that seems to still work today. To tackle the matter, the Commission for Racial Equality was set up in order to educate the population of Britain “about the need to regard [themselves] as a multiracial society and to act accordingly” (Alex Lyons, qtd. in Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 77). The Race Relations Act of 1976 also came into force introducing new rights and protection for non-white immigrants.

However, as soon as she became leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, Margaret Thatcher has expressed her disapproval of the 1976 Act (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 77). She took over Enoch Powell’s views with regard to English nationhood and British history and, along with a radical economic structuring, she has succeeded in “put[ting] back the ‘great’ in Britain and this included pride in the Empire” (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 79). PM Thatcher’s political perspective is

characterised by Phillip Dodd in terms of ethnic rigidity and racism and in imperial attitudes: "Mrs Thatcher's Britishness depended ... upon a sustained process of purification and exclusion. In her British story, enemies were here, there, everywhere ..." (Dood, qtd. in Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 79).

The "enemy" was more often than not in the hands of the police, allowed to identify and keep it in control. As explained by a police officer (the Metropolitan police), it was Thatcher that made it clear to the police that "we could do anything to control the enemy within. They were blacks, trade unionists, and people who did not agree with her views" (in Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 81), her views being more often than not anti-communist. Although Mehmood makes a point in the beginning of the novel that it is not a political or legal history but merely a fictionalized account of the event (of July 11 1981 in Bradford, UK), the portrayal of the protagonist is made within a clear political context. The events of "serious unrest in British cities" (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 83) that happened in the eighties were also part of the Thatcherite politics that promoted the idea of Britishness based on social (in fact, racial) purification and exclusion (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 79). While the police and white Britons were at a point where they had "to make an honest assessment of how they had failed to create a cohesive nation" (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 83), "Black Britons (...) needed to look at how their young could be pulled back from self-destructive tendencies (...) whereby the experience of racism corrodes all sense of direction, self-esteem, even a sense of morality" (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 83-84).

The protagonist's migration experience is brutal especially because of the fact that he was snatched from his parents at a very early age and transposed to a place that had nothing in common with the familiarity of his place of birth. This experience is shown as conducive of an increased fragmentariness of the individual's identity which is almost always described by ethnicity, nationality and race. This is reflected in Saleem's words pointing to a multitude of identities that add up:

The lad who went to Valait was not me. I was born again in England, a Paki at first, and an Asian later, then a Black with pride and finally, as a rebel who sought a different world, one where no one who would have to go through what he had. (Mehmood, 2003: 38)

What he '[had] to go through' can be translated both as the separation from the mother (which will be discussed in more detail in the following section) and as the forced and aggressive re-combination of his multiple identities and the processes that accompanied it.

Alibhai-Brown examines closely the events of British cities in the 1980s and asserts that "they destroyed black and white expectancies" (2001: 84) and determine people to make false assumptions about immigrants. Therefore, first

generation immigrants are expected to “work [...] inhumanly hard, expect [...] little, long [...] and plan [...] for back home” (2001: 84). She continues by describing the situation of second-generation British Asians:

The second generation learns to squander time and money a little more, partly because is setting in and back home is just a faraway dream resort. Their values shift, they get into terrible battles with the deepest values so carefully imported by their parents, but some kind of understanding is reached by both sides, partly because the older generation is also having to change in spite of itself. By the third generation, acceptance is complete, the problems are over. (Alibhai-Brown, 2001: 84)

The author disagrees with such assumptions warning against the power of racism to disrupt social cohesion. The protagonist of the novel is neither a first-generation nor a second-generation but a 1.5-generation immigrant. Alibhai-Brown acknowledges that it is unlikely for “young blacks, born and brought up here” (2001: 85) to feel that they are integrated while “widespread discrimination persisted and negative attitudes still prevailed towards non-white Britons” (2001: 85). If this is the case for second-generation immigrants, the situation of 1.5-generation immigrants must have been even worse.

2. The ‘terrorist’ label or being a victim of ‘terror’ – embracing communist views while avoiding fundamentalist propaganda

The rejection and racism that Saleem has faced in England both as a child and especially as a teenager – in the context of the police arresting Asian youths whenever petty crime occurred in city neighbourhoods – made the protagonist develop a preference for the idea of community and togetherness, as it is called in the novel. Acting together (Saleem and other Asian youths) became a strategy of defense against white racism – “we stayed together” (Mehmood, 2001: 117) – defense which was often labelled by the authorities as potential acts of terrorism, label that worsened the already weak connection that the protagonist was trying to maintain with the receiving country and its culture.

The sense of togetherness and fight against racist attitudes, combined with poverty and the rising of the working class, later developed into an awe for the communist manifesto. Not only was he curious to study the English edition but Saleem also struggled with the Russian, French, German, Polish and the Italian one, trying to translate their prefaces. However, the core of the manifesto did not need translation as Saleem “fully understood the words”, which “created a kind of awe in [him], the feeling that someone was talking to [him] directly from a century before” (Mehmood, 2003: 169):

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, have stood throughout history in constant opposition to one another, carrying on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, whither in revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Mehmood, 2003: 169)

His embracing of communist views did not simply occur though. Saleem's first encounter with someone who called himself a Commie was in his childhood when, harassed by a white boy, he was saved by the boy's very father. The man was disappointed at his son's behavior who, upset at being interrupted from performing his "right" to abuse "Pakis", calls his own father insulting names. Later on, Saleem is arrested for breaking in property and has to go to jail. A member of the South Asian community living in Bradford, Bava Payara Singh, a communist and activist from Kashmir who acquaint the protagonist with class struggle and communism. It is him who first takes Saleem to the workers' marches, Union Jack demonstrations, where people chant "Workers ... united ... will never be defeated" (Mehmood, 2003: 159):

The demonstrations snaked, as far back as I could see, almost everyone was white. The Asians were mostly at the front. I didn't recognize any of them. This was the first large, white crowd I'd known that didn't feel hostile. There was a strong sense of some purpose, which I didn't understand. (Mehmood, 2003: 160)

Saleem's communist views are at the intersection of Western and Eastern attitudes. If in the capitalist West, namely in the UK, communism is despised and fought against at political level, in Pakistan, Saleem has been taught by vigilant imams that communists, equated with the Russian invaders of Afghanistan, are to be hated. Likewise, hypocrite mullahs such as Haji Abdullah and Mohammad Azam, respected members of the (British) Pakistani community whose primary concern was to advance in life by using the name of Islam, support the anti-communist fight in Pakistan by recruiting young British Pakistani men who are sent to Pakistan for this purpose. This is done by collecting funds for the building of a new mosque and by supporting Quranic classes where the propaganda and recruitment process takes place. The writer mocks at the fundamentalism displayed by the two mullahs as well as at the American intrusion in the Muslim world, eager to make friends against the communist enemy. Thus, Mehmood describes how on one occasion he noticed the presence of an American man at the Quranic classes held by the two mullahs:

He was said to be a convert, committed to fighting for the freedom of Afghanistan. But he talked only to Haji Abdullah and Maulvi Azam. Over the next few months each of them began to drive round in a new Mercedes Benz. (Mehmood, 2003: 140)

In order to prove the phony character of the two mullahs' good intentions, the author turns them into two antagonists who were officially said to have 'some theological difference' though in reality their war was based on 'who controlled the jihad funds' (Mehmood, 2003: 140).

Mehmood deliberately 'kills' his two characters, Haji and Azam, who, as it is revealed in the novel, actually kill each other in a fight over unimportant issues such as dyeing or not dyeing one's beard was or not an act of disobedience of the rules of the Prophet. Though the two men commit murder, they are treated and regarded by the community of believers in the UK as well as by that in their own birth places as martyrs who have fought in the name of Islam. The writer does not try to avoid his disapproval of the two mullahs. On the contrary, Mehmood reveals their true (im)morality and even ridicules their burials by turning the coffins they were brought in Pakistan and in Kashmir respectively into vehicles of bootlegging. Both the protagonist-narrator (Saleem) and the author use every opportunity at scoffing hypocrisy and at revealing corruption, racism, as well as violence based on race or religion.

Saleem succeeds at finding a profitable use of the naïveté and blind faith in religious precepts and practices, the protagonist not being one of those radical believers. His actions speak of an individual that cannot be labelled 'fundamentalist' or, as it is more often than not falsely equated with 'terrorist'. As soon as he realises that the coffins are symbols of faith and are respected as such even by the Pakistani police, the protagonist decides to turn them into objects of profit. Thus, he plays the role of a good Muslim, respectful of religion and of imams, and convinces the relatives of the two dead mullahs to give away the coffins ('impure' objects made by the hands of the unfaithful Angraiz - English) to him:

Haji Abdullah was a great God-serving man" (...) "He taught me all I know and I think you should burry him in the manner most befitting for a man like him. But I beg that you let me keep this wooden coffin so I may remember him. It is only wood and it comes from that land where I lived with Haji Saab. (Mehmood, 2003: 141-142)

Saleem, unlike other Pakistani British young characters portrayed in diasporic literature and film (see *My Son the Fundamentalist*, 1997 and *East is East*, 1999) is not easily convinced by the authority of Islam as it is preached by phony mullahs. Instead, he sometimes takes drugs, drinks alcohol, smokes, whores and eventually sells spirits to men in Pakistan who would say anything just to grab a little of the "Valaiti medicine" – all acts that can be considered non-Islamic and belonging to the "corrupt" West. The writer insists on the protagonist's innocence in matters of

the police while emphasising racist attitudes and violence and aggressiveness towards immigrants.

The law that protects property in England is used in the novel in one of the episodes in which Saleem is interrogated by the police. The police officer makes it clear for the young man that "we have laws to protect property" (Mehmood, 2003: 201), the subject "we" not including Saleem who is obviously another/an Other, an intruder. "Intruders" like him violate the owners' right to property by simply living in the same whereabouts. The fact that the protagonist did enter a property is justified by the author as an effect of previous gratuitous police aggressiveness against him and his friends, practically coercively making them to sign statements according to which they admitted to an act of theft which they had not actually committed. One of Saleem's friends acknowledges the non-sense character of the situation by asserting that they might just as well become thieves (since they – though forcibly – admitted to the theft).

Another character, an old man called Payara Singh also deplores the status of young Pakistanis in England while trying to raise Saleem's awareness in matters of racism, colonialism and the concept of "theft". Payara Singh makes the young man remember his place of birth by telling stories of his own youth back in Pakistan. Using locations as points of reference, such as the Ramdayaal School, the man turns the discussion in a direction more on his pleasing, that is raising awareness against the consequences of colonialism and post-colonialism (literally, in terms of the *chronos*): "When I was young, Mir Haider [probably, a school teacher] used to say, "Dacoits ['bandits', in Pothowari] have no colour". We must not let these white thieves, be replaced by those who look like us" (Mehmood, 2003: 155).

Through Singh, Mehmood touches upon an important though almost imperceptible issue: the issue of skin colour, of features and very likely of clothing items that may suggest one's belonging to a particular ethnic group, that is holding a minority social position. It is no secret that Muslim-looking (especially male) individuals may become suspects for this reason only. Singh asserts the injustice of equating "theft" (synonym with crime, synonym with acts against the well-being of society) by using an attack strategy – "white thieves". One is due to wonder whether such type of raising awareness generates anger in Muslim/Pakistani immigrant youth who have experienced racism/discrimination, maybe even more than the propaganda of Muslim mullahs driven by personal selfish interests. Paraya Singh's actions cannot be fully assessed as intentionally provoking anger or even hatred, though he is indeed a communist activist. Singh does put it bluntly – "How our simple folk believe in white lies. This country has done us no favours by bringing us to this land" (id.) – and he does use logic in order to be more credible – "Thieves are not born, are they?" (Mehmood, 2003: 155) – but it is always done in a subversive way, with a purpose. Consequently, we are suddenly asked, by using Saleem as his interlocutor: "Why are you here, in this country?" (Mehmood, 2003:

155), a simple question that could be asked (to) any immigrant. Singh, in a calculated manner, lets young inexperienced disoriented Saleem find the answer for this question before he provides an answer himself:

You came here to grow up quickly and work. Now, I am but a passing visitor in this life. I am but a sigh from the past. But you, my son, in you are buried the dreams of our future. Yet, you have let them turn you into a thief, a chour. A bandit. Everything is made by men, hands of men and women, those that live and those that have long since died. (Mehmood, 2003: 156-157)

3. The reconnection with the mother(land)

The character of Paraya Singh occurs quite late in the novel, before many episodes in which the protagonist shows signs that he is homesick and frustrated by the internal conflict caused by the absence of a mother (synonym with motherland) in his childhood. Nonetheless, Singh plays a significant role in Saleem's reconnection with his past and his ethnic identity. The way in which Singh's character is built shows that he is also an experienced propagandist whose aim is to make youth such as Saleem reconstruct the greatness of his place of birth and especially of its people. He relies on the young generation to bring back that greatness by faintly suggesting that young Pakistanis or Kashmiris should return "home".

In order to connect on a more personal with the protagonist, the latter becomes "my son" (also a common way of address between old men and young men in Pakistan). Still using the leit-motif of 'theft', Singh tells Saleem: "They have stolen your world and your mind and you go and steal cigarettes, and think you have achieved something" (Mehmood, 2003: 157), and he instantly links this to Saleem's ancestral past – "Do not dishonor your ancestors" (Mehmood, 2003: 157) – while emphasising the importance of community, togetherness, of acting together: "There is no power in being alone. And this world belongs to us, workers and toilers and it really doesn't matter how long it takes, but one day we will take it back" (id.). And Singh's final blow comes at the end: "We kicked gorays [whites] out of our homeland – what will you do? Steal from pubs ..." (Mehmood, 2003: 157).

History, the past, the greatness of these young men's ancestors must call them back. It is in this that the difference between the propaganda carried on by mullahs such as Haji Abdullah and activists such as Paraya Singh lies, as it is shown in the novel: one uses religion as instrument of ethnic/racial differentiation generative of hatred, while the other uses colonial exploitation and racism as instruments of raising awareness. Tariq Mehmood chooses not to build a protagonist that becomes a fundamentalist (such as the protagonist of the film *My Son the Fanatic*), in spite of social contexts that were present at the moment and of propagandists of any sorts. Instead, his protagonist is a character that eventually comes to terms with his

personal story embedded in history. It thus becomes more of a romanticised story in which the mother and motherland are idealised concepts whose worth is appreciated by 1.5-generation immigrants such as Saleem. History is as important as personal history, Singh suggests, and thus he tells the story of the young protagonist's family:

Your family came to Banyala [Saleem's place of birth] around 1890 because of what England did to Kashmir. That is why Kashmir is still bleeding today. In 1846, when England ruled India, they sold Kashmir to a Dogra called Maharaja Gulab Singh. They sold all our ancestors, for three hundred thousand pounds. It is a lot of money now and it those days it must have been an awful lot more. But they sold everything. Our jungles, our people, our animals, our rivers, our lands. Everything. Maharaja Gulab Singh was a Hindu ruler who, like any businessman wanted to get his money back from his investments. There used to be a law which said that if you killed a cow then you would be sentenced to death and if you killed a Muslim Kashmiri then you would be fined a few paisas. (Mehmood, 2003: 157)

Paraya Singh brings into the picture a very delicate and painful historical period, the Partition of India in 1947, when India was divided and became a state. If mullahs Haji Ali and Muhammad Azaf warn against the "corrupt" West, Singh, a Kashmiri, cannot forget the violence and injustice within and between the countries of the subcontinent (especially Pakistan and India) joined by the participation of the West (England).

The theft *leit-motif* is always a conflictual connection between England and Pakistan (and Kashmir). England is often referred to as a country that stole what is not "hers". The protagonist remembers episodes of his encounters with his mother when she was still alive. A Kashmiri, the mother complains about the consequences of British colonialism in South Asia. Her discourse is almost completely built on the double theft *leit-motif* - England had stolen her people's history and culture as well as her little boy:

See that stupa, Saleem," Mother had said, sitting on a metal chair under the shade of a large banyan tree. (...) "It is thousands of years old. It was built by Buddhist people before this land was blessed by Islam. And nowadays it is the shape we build barns in for storing hay for the animals. In those days when these stupas were built, in their centre, there used to be a pot of gold which lay hidden for a thousand years without anyone disturbing it. But you English stole it and took it to England. It is probably imprisoned in some museum of yours. (Mehmood, 2003: 46)

Many of the diasporic Pakistani characters in the novel want to get back at the English by being clever enough as to recuperate some of the wealth that the colonists have taken from their own country. One of them, a passenger on the same

plane as Saleem who was travelling from England to Pakistan, tells him that “English are clever bastards you know” (...) “If one person makes a mistake, they punish everybody” (Mehmood, 2003: 28). He thus wants to benefit from the English pension not only himself but also his relatives after his death. In order to achieve this, he has a plan: he has increased his age by fifteen years in his papers and, since he is illiterate and must use his thumb prints in order to sign, he will ask his family to chop off his fingers when he is dead in order to continue signing on papers and get his pension.

There is a constant return to the concept of theft, often linked to Islamism. Always aware of the public sentiment towards Islam in Western countries such as Britain as well as of a generalised conception of respected (though not necessarily ‘respectable’) religious figures within Muslim communities on the West assumed to be inherently corrupt and impure, Tariq Mehmood courageously attacks fundamentalised behavior and mentality. He tries to keep a fair balance between criticism of white racism disguised as care for the integrity and safety of the (British) nation and hate against the former coloniser and fundamentalism disguised as religion. Thus, he repeatedly jeers at various fundamental imams who teach young children and teenagers to reject the West and its “corrupt” ways. One of them is Maulvi Deenu, the imam who taught Saleem the Quran back in Pakistan. His method of teaching is portrayed by Mehmood as too antique, outdated if altogether dangerous and useless in a process of cultural negotiation. Maulvi Deenu taught young Saleem not to be led astray from the path of Islam when he would arrive in England, a deep fear also expressed by the boy’s father and uncles in Pakistan. Saleem acknowledges that somehow he was indeed led astray from the teachings of Islam but not by the “corrupt” West:

With stick and slap he [Maulvi Deenu] he had taught me to read the Quran. Contrary to the beliefs of my father and uncles, I was not led astray from the path of Islam by the infidelities of the West but by the antics of Maulvi Deenu. (Mehmood, 2003: 121-122)

According to Saleem, Maulvi Saleem has used lies and induction of terror onto him as a child in order to make him be obedient but the child concludes that the maulvi’s teachings “[is] all a lie!” (Mehmood, 2003: 123).

The education process in Pakistan is criticised, the writer using a few characters who deplore the violence and lack of proper conditions in the school while they assume that the education received by Saleem in England is of a superior quality, an opinion triggered by an interiorised mixed feeling of awe-and-grudge towards the English/British. Nonetheless, the protagonist instantly describes his experience as a student in England, revealing unrestrainedly the discrimination and racism present in English schools.

Despite racist attitudes, the young protagonist is in a process of negotiation more with his own pain generated by the loss of the mother(land) rather than by cultural difference. The experience with the British police and with racism have already made Saleem to take sides: he used to respect England and its laws but he knows he does not love it (England); this does not make him an implicit terrorist (as authorities try to label and punish him), a status he struggles to define and prove in front of the judge of his trial and of the large society. Nonetheless, disappointment and the reconnection with the memory of his mother(land) affect his national loyalties as well.

The mother often refers to her son Saleem as "you English" or "Valaiti" (Britisher) thus acknowledging the difference that exists between her, someone who never left the country, and her son, who, although born in Pakistan, grew up in England. It is not an indication that she loves her son any less but acknowledgment and acceptance of her loss. She painfully keeps repeating that, by taking her son away from her, England actually stole her motherhood. The mother-son relationship is a deep one, despite being conflictual due to the son's incapacity to understand the real reasons behind his migrant status, a status he cannot come to terms with, being unable to feel like he belongs to the country of destination.

Tariq Mehmood oscillates between portraying characters that address Saleem as a "Valaiti", a stranger, even in his own country, Pakistan, and other characters that, on the contrary, remind the protagonist that he is still Pakistani, one of "them". One such character, Bara Sardar, reminds Saleem that his real home is Pakistan by using allegory:

you can forget us, but we can't forget you, because you are a part of us" (86) (...)
"plants can grow anywhere (...) but they are only truly happy in that earth which gave them birth. It is only there they find life's true meaning, and it is earth, in one form or another, to which everything has to return. That is Nature's law.
 (Mehmood, 2003: 87)

Mehmood insists on the protagonist's feeling of homesick-ness, especially expressed through the loss of his mother in his childhood and adolescence. The writer does not portray Saleem as being incapable of adapting to a new society; instead, the protagonist is continuously struggling with a feeling of being given up and/or given away, not wanted, not loved, a feeling accompanied by the outcome of white racism against him as an immigrant. Therefore, Bara Sardar's words may be interpreted as coming from an *alter ego* of the home country itself, a country impersonated by the mother figure. The writer uses words such as "birth", "life", "earth", "Nature" – all of them *topoi* of the concept of motherhood. Subsequently, Saleem is portrayed confronting his father for the first time in a monologue in which the boy opposes the mother figure to the father figure (motherhood to fatherhood). As the mother fell ill after she was separated from her little boy, she

died soon after a surgery she did not want to take but was forced to by her husband. Saleem had blamed himself for the mother's illness for many years but during his last visit (when he came to attend his mother's funeral), he understands that he is not for blame:

It wasn't me who did this [killed her]. It was you. You [father] decided I should go, you tore me from her. You killed her as much as you killed me 15 years ago. You decided to rid her of me; no mother could've done that to her son. It was you. (Mehmood, 2003: 90)

Others, such as his cousin Hamza, do not blame anyone except "this pig of a country" (Mehmood, 2003: 91) (Pakistan), for its poor hospitals and incompetent doctors, a situation brought about by the government which, instead of struggling to give its people proper conditions of living, is building atom bombs with the help of the Americans (Mehmood, 2003: 91).

This is not the first time that Mehmood uses politics as well as history in his book despite the fact that he asserts that it is simply a fictional account of events. He indirectly mocks Pakistani society and government while he does not forget to criticise English society, politics and especially the police. Along with this, he brings about extreme Muslim fanaticism and propaganda performed both in the UK and in Pakistan.

3.1 The Call of the Mother(land) as ancestral home

Motherland and the concept of mother as protector and source of nurture both physical and emotional are frequently approached by South Asian diasporic writers who live in western countries such as the U.K., the U.S.A. and Canada. It is a common characteristic of the diasporan's psyche while away from his/her country of birth and experiencing racism and/or discrimination or merely not fitting in the new society in order to exaggerate the importance and beauty of the ancestral 'home'. S/he sees beauty where s/he has not seen before, while living in the country of birth, and starts missing specific elements of the life s/he used to have.

In Tariq Mehmood's novel, the protagonist's concept of mother is intertwined with that of the motherland. His experience as a migrant is one of 'forced' migration as he was sent to England at an age when he could not take decisions for and of his own. Additionally, he was sent to live as a young child with family other than his own parents. Living with extended family is not uncommon on the subcontinent and as much as children are concerned, mother-sharing among female members of the family can even be preferred both by families and by children. Nonetheless, when Saleem gets to England to live with his uncle and aunt, the warmth and sense of protection diffused by the existence of extended family over children on the subcontinent no longer functions when these families and children are transferred in a diaspora in the West (here U.K.). It is as if the system that worked 'back there'

is no longer functional 'over here' where the norm is different or even the opposite of 'what-we-used-to-know' (the familiar).

In the absence of the extended family's protection, or better yet in the presence of a 'castrated' extended South Asian family in the West, the protagonist is vulnerable and likely to become part of events described by the Western legal system as crimes. Resentful of being (r)ejected at an early age – as he had assumed before listening to the cassette recorded by his mother – Saleem is caught up in a complex conflict between love for and grudge against the mother(land) both of whom he tries to forget her/it.

It is the power of memories that bustle against Saleem's will and bring back the image of the mother(land). Unwillingly, he remembers the last time he had visited his mother(land), details of his last visit, memories of the past, of his childhood, of the home (as house) he used to live in. Memories become reality when he gets to Pakistan again at the sad news of his mother's death. Pakistani soil becomes part of the concepts of motherland and of mother, now buried in this soil.

One aspect must be clarified here with respect to the question of motherland. The protagonist's mother is a symbol of controversy, conflict, war: she is a native of Kashmir, a Muslim Kashmiri, whose family moved to Pakistan after the Partition. Mehmood insists on the episode of the protagonist's reconnection with his now dead mother, buried in an ancestral village graveyard in Banyala, Pakistan. The writer's own position with regard to the Kashmir issue appears to be an impartial, objective one, expressing his wish that Kashmir be free. Nonetheless, it is not clear who should it be free of. The mother itself, comparable to the Kashmir region, is portrayed as an individual who had no control over her own life. Though she loved her husband, she was married off not to a Kashmiri but to a Pakistani man. Additionally, it is her husband and father who decide that her son Saleem be taken away from her; it is still her husband who forces her to get surgery (soon after the operation the woman dies). As she herself admits, she had been dead long before she has started feeling physical pain – she first "died" when she had to let Saleem go to England and become a "Valaiti".

The protagonist did not know the story of his family's past until Payara Singh told him that his family comes from Kashmir. It is at this time that Saleem internalises this story in his own story and identity. Payara Singh is a catalyst for Saleem's feelings and connection with the mother(land). It is through Singh's story-telling that homeland becomes important, a part of Saleem. "I long to hear the sounds of those words you boys say in your language" (...) "more than sounds, I love where those sounds come from" (Mehmood, 2003: 152), says Payara Singh who hints at their mother tongue (Pothowari) and their place of birth (Banyala and its neighbourhood). The beauty of their mother tongue intermingles with the beauty of the place in a sad imagined music that pours over Banyala missing its sons who are

lost on the streets or (worse) in the jail boxes of England: “When you talk (...) I hear flutes, wailing over those hills at those feet Banyala sits’ (Mehmood, 2003: 153). This is “Potowar’s ancient music’ (Mehmood, 2003: 153).

The image of the motherland is completed by the concept of land and by (hi)stories of its heroes and myths. Paraya Singh continues his story: “You come from a land of heroes and lovers, my son” (Mehmood, 2003: 153), people of whose stories are not known by the youth. Those who fought the colonisers represent Saleem’s past, history. Collective memory incorporates individuals’ memory, as Singh puts it: “These people are your history. They live in our memory. Memory never dies. It is reborn with each generation, always rejuvenated, full of past light, waiting to shine” (Mehmood, 2003: 153). Motherland is a place where one must return, it is one’s “beloved” (Mehmood, 2003: 154). Payara Singh’s beloved is his homeland, Punjab, wounded but still young although thousands of years old (Mehmood, 2003: 154). It is also the place where Saleem returns although he does not know his journey to Pakistan was to become his last. The present that his mother left for him before she died (the recorded cassettes) is the story of his birth, of his family, and of Saleem’s separation from the mother.

Not unintentionally, the story of Saleem’s birth is intermingled with a historical episode – India’s Partition in 1947. When Pakistan separated from India and became a nation of its own, there were lots of killings on both sides of the border. Thus, many Muslims who lived in new India were murdered while Hindus and Sikhs were murdered in Pakistan. The novel contains glimpses of a true episode in which a train that was travelling to Pakistan arrived full of bodies of people who had been killed. In the novel, two twin Hindu sisters were saved from the train of terror by the people of Banyala. They later helped Saleem’s mother give birth to the boy. As the mother acknowledges, the two girls, Massi Patho and Massi Pago “weren’t from our village. They weren’t even born Muslims. They became Muslims after coming to Banyala” (Mehmood, 2003: 179). According to the story, the girls, although twins, are like two opposites (an allegory of the two sister-countries, Pakistan and India, who used to be one but are now opposites): they continuously argue over everything and whatever one of them asserts has had to be contradicted by the other. The inclusion of these two characters comes to strengthen the protagonist’s conflicted identity; like the twin sisters, Saleem is two in one – one (Asian) English and one Pakistani (half Kashmiri). Additionally, his fluid, changing identity is also expressed by his official papers. The boy who was supposed to go to England was Saleem’s young uncle, Shabir, a boy Saleem’s own age who had died before he could be taken to England. As Saleem’s grandfather (and Shabir’s father) came to bring his family to live with him in England, he decided to take Saleem along, in his own son’s place, because at that age the English border police would not notice the difference between two Asian little boys. Saleem’s mother reveals that “I don’t know whether you know, but your date of birth on your passport is not your real date of birth. You are about one year

younger than what it says in there” (Mehmood, 2003:177). His precise, real date of birth is unimportant – a detail that is not paid attention to on the subcontinent, as it is mentioned in the novel.

Taken to “a land without parents” (Mehmood, 2003: 188), according to his mother, Saleem indeed feels abandoned. After many years, back in Pakistan, his mother already dead before he had the chance to say goodbye to her, the protagonist is told the story of the very house he was born in and in which he lived during his early childhood. His mother recounts how she and her husband built the house themselves – “We built the house with our own hands, you know” (Mehmood, 2003: 172) – a detail that underlines the connection between land, house and individual. Moreover, “in our yard we used to have a great big jandh tree. (...) Our jandh was very old, it was even older than me (...)” (Mehmood, 2003: 172), the old tree symbolising history and stability (it has strong roots). Additionally, the shade of the tree “was so sweet, it kept our water cool” (Mehmood, 2003: 172). The shade is but the protection offered by the house (home), by what you build with your own hands.

4. Conclusions

Despite the writer’s disapproval, *While There Is Light* is at least a half-biographical novel made up of several stories embedded in one – the story of a diasporic individual for whom cultural adaptation is a conflicting experience that impedes him from being fully integrated if not assimilated by the host culture. It is conflicting both because of the protagonist’s personal immigrant story that contains a family story that lacks closure (the answer to the question of his migration experience comes only late) and due to perpetual acts of racism performed in the host country. The question of being reconnected with one’s motherland (synonymous with the ancestral home) is intermingled in this case with the reconnection with the mother. The difficulties met on the way of Saleem’s cultural negotiation experience are amplified by the lack of the mother perceived by the hero as rejection, expulsion. It is in fact a double rejection/expulsion while in England where he does not feel accepted. The issue of return is systematically built by Mehmood who prepares the path by introducing various other characters (such as Paraya Singh in England and other various characters who live in Pakistan). The latter emphasise the greatness of the ideal ancestral home as well as the shrewdness and selfishness of the British who attracted Pakistanis to their country only to exploit and mistreat them. By placing Britain in opposition to Pakistan, the West against the East, Paraya Singh – though seemingly one of Mehmood’s favourite characters – is not much different from characters that the writer mocks (e.g. imam Haji Abdullah) for being promoters of fundamentalist propaganda. The theft *leit-motif* pervades the novel, spreading from England’s stealing of Pakistan’s wealth during colonial times and of its young sons in post-colonial times, to acts of stealing by young diasporic Pakistani men forced by circumstances to become

‘thieves’, to the British/English authorities (represented mainly by the police and the judicial system) who have stolen these men’s innocence, to acts of corruption.

Tariq Mehmood’s novel is but one of the many diasporic British Asian novels that tackle issues of identity, cultural (non)negotiation, return to the home country, and racism. It is also but one of the many attitudes towards the problems mentioned above leaving room for diverse comparable stands.

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