

# Many Muslim Truths

## Ethnic Absolutism

From Yasmin Ali, lecturer at Lancashire Polytechnic

'You could see that this community was complex, different, sometimes confused,' wrote Yasmin Alibhai in December's *Marxism Today*. It's a clever mode of address, the accusatory, second-person plural, borrowed from anti-racism's box of tricks, and losing none of its power from being wielded by ethnic absolutists. The usage is also one of the symptoms of the complexity, difference and confusion that Alibhai rightly identifies, but does little to understand, in her reflections on the *Satanic Verses* affair.

A year after the original demonstrations and death threats the affair rumbles on, its origins increasingly mythologised, the protagonists stereotyped, the victim reduced to a cipher, not a man of flesh and blood in perpetual hiding. We have a responsibility to disrupt this process, from wherever we stand in the shifting sands of ethnic identity, because the *Satanic Verses* row does not have, and must not be identified as having, only two sides.

One of the ersatz sides in global terms is Islam; in British terms it is 'the Muslim community'. Suddenly 'Muslim' is added to the lexicon of 'race', whether through liberal consideration, ethnic assertion or popular abuse.

In reality, communities now consumed by this label have histories, even very recent histories, that have embraced

then abandoned 'ethnic' tags with amazing rapidity. There is no reason to believe that prefixing 'Muslim' to 'community' is going to encapsulate some timeless truth about them, any more than 'Asian', 'Pakistani' or even 'black' did in the past.

The media's monolithic Muslims of Bradford, for example, less than 20 years ago humiliated a Labour Party that dared to stand a Muslim candidate in a ward with a high proportion of Muslim voters. That is because in 1971 ethnic identity derived from nationalism and the experience of war in the Indian sub-continent, not from a shared religious faith.

Before that decade was out I saw at a political gathering Bradford's Asian Youth Movement, united across language and religion, yelling '*chamcha!*' at the tops of their voices at middle-class pillars of moderation and respectability.

More subversive still are the young women of northern cities, who, in their white stiletos, dance around handbags in nightclubs, or their sisters at home, whose comprehensive knowledge of sex is belied by their 'traditional' appearance.

A metropolitan journalist heading north to these communities will today hear the 'line' on *The Satanic Verses* from those they speak to, but it's an elaborate etiquette that reveals both more and less than it pretends.

When I chose to make a public defence of Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Ver-*

*ses* I was warned by friends, both black and white, not to under-estimate the depth of feeling there was on the issue. Certainly there have been some difficulties, but also some surprises which have thrown light on to some of the complexities of race, ethnicity, class and identity, and which have helped me better to understand the community in which I live.

Shortly after appearing on local tv I was walking through a shopping centre when a group of young Asian men called my name. I joined them cautiously as one of them began, 'You've got funny views on Salman Rushdie'. He was silenced by another, who declared that it was 'good having one of our people, someone from Preston, on telly'.

As the conversation continued it became a plea for help. They were unemployed, bored with hanging around and unwelcome in white clubs and pubs. Lacking knowledge of the system, cynical about the motives of Labour councillors, sharp but alienated from local politics, these lads were ripe for mobilisation by anyone who could offer them purpose and dignity. That they probably ended up on anti-Rushdie marches says more about the failure of the Left than about their own piety.

The politics of race and ethnicity in Britain has changed out of all recognition in the last decade. The decline of manufacturing industry and conti-

nued high unemployment compounded by racism in the labour market has set communities looking inwards. Pessimism breeds conservatism.

At the same time there has been the rise of a small, sometimes insecure Asian middle class. Social mobility can breed conservatism, too. In the early 80s the Left taught anti-racist lessons; white guilt, black autonomy. The Right took over the act for different political ends, teaching ethnicist lessons; no guilt, ethnic autonomy. White parents don't want their children in a mainly 'Asian' school? The Right will back them. Muslim parents want an Islamic girls' school? The Right will back them, too.

These things have all contributed to a grumbling crisis which found a focus in the *Satanic Verses* affair. It is a crisis that can only be illuminated if we can hear, unadulterated, the voices of the many sides involved. It can only be resolved if the many sides then engage, politically.

This means that the Left must re-analyse and reassess the politics of 'race', just as it is having to renegotiate its relationship with the dynamic of class. Liberal despair at the 'irreconcilability' of secular democratic institutions and the tenets of Islam, as well as Yasmin Alibhai's angry and inconsistent amalgamation of anti-racist white guilt-tripping and ethnicist opting-out, can only inhibit the necessary engagement.●

## Endemic Racism

Julie Burchill's unbounded anger (*MT Jan*) against *all* the intolerant, corrupt, colonial tribes (sic!) cannot surely only have been provoked by Yasmin Alibhai's alleged compromises with militant Islam.

Some deeper animosity must have lurked to surface with such extravagant violence. Perhaps she has been able, until now, to suppress the primitive fear and hatred which provokes her innocent, youthful working-class kin into stoning my aged mother as she looks for a working public phone in an essentially white area of the West Country.

I think Alibhai is a brave woman. She has challenged the very group which dispenses the goodies to nice middle-class Asians. She is more courageous still to confess in public the private anguish which most women and men

feel on being left. A person may have the right to leave a spouse and child but there is a corresponding right to feel aggrieved and betrayed. Only Julie Burchill's proud feminism allows instant freedom from regret at being left.

The larger question of Islamic militancy is deeply bound up with the long history of bitter conflict between the Occident and the Orient. What other comparable principles are defended so vengefully? Contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is substantially a perverse symptom of racial humiliations and economic exploitation being inflicted by Western nations.

On the eve of my 20th anniversary here, I begin to doubt that racialism can be overcome. It also seems to me that European feminism shares the reflex genocidal impulse towards black men that is em-

bedded more generally in white society. These feminists' reaction to the political and religious intolerance over *The Satanic Verses* degenerated quickly into revulsion at the indirect but more emotive issue of sexuality and Islam, tapping a rich historical seam of Occidental racial hysteria.

Many Asian women have become complicit in this project as the price of acceptability to the host community, which understandably finds the socially-subordinate female outsider less threatening; otherwise the Southall Black (sic!) Sisters would have perceived the chilling symbolism of marching against Islam at the same time as the National Front.

I am not a believer or a Muslim, but some very nasty truths now stand exposed and no universal values remain to make things whole.●  
Gautam Sen, London

## Cleansing Comedy

Yasmin Alibhai sweeps at a tangent right past her subject. She says she is against free speech for Nazis, the NF and child pornographers. Rushdie is none of these, so why does she not speak up for him?

The sequence about the Great Imam in *The Satanic Verses* is a tremendous satire on the destructiveness of a tyrant who holds sway under a religious banner. The spirit is everywhere in the novel, as it is in *Midnight's Children*, especially the parts concerned with the cruel absurdities of nationalism.

We all need these books of fearless rationality and cleansing comedy, whether we belong like Yasmin Alibhai to a victimised minority or to a privileged majority as I do.●

David Craig,  
Burton in Kendal

## Driving Mad

Defenders of the status quo resort to steadily more untenable arguments to defend the indefensible. Jonathan Glancey in 'Driving Passion' (MT Jan) is no exception.

First, the car industry, apparently now converted to feminism, peddles the myth that cars have 'liberated women'. Crap. Single yuppies possibly, but 40% of women do not even possess a driving licence and they are predominantly the young, the elderly and the poor.

Second, the car industry's 'green' conversion. Despite the hype surrounding lead-free petrol, little has been done to lower carbon-dioxide emissions, the prime source of the greenhouse effect. The 'caring' types with their lead-free stickers in the windows of their GTi's are fooling themselves.

Third, freedom of mobility. For the elderly, the poor, those without access to a car and people aged 17 and under, the car has cut personal mobility, as public transport has been systematically undermined.

Fourth, employment. The car industry does provide jobs, but in post-Fordist 'new times' for steadily fewer. Not only that, but Fiat, GM, Volkswagen and Ford have switched production to Latin America, Eastern Europe and the EC's southern periphery where labour is cheaper (and tamer).

Fifth, people 'want' cars for the same social prestige reasons they can be persuaded by slick ad campaigns to want CD players, home computers or any other hi-tech gizmo.

On the political front, the car industry has no shortage of allies. Against this barrage from vested interests, outfits like Friends of the Earth, the Pedestrians' Association, the cycling campaigns and public-transport trade unions are but straws in the wind.

So pervasive is the car culture, that well-meaning types who campaign on behalf of a threatened village, a piece of woodland or a Georgian terrace fail to see the impact of their resource-consuming, tarmac-spreading, road-clogging, fume-belching metal box on the amenity they fight to defend.

The case for more investment in public transport and curbs on both private and company cars is overwhelming and opposed only by fools or corporate interests. I await with pleasure any government with the bottle to do it. ●

Mike Gibson, London

## Deeply Meaningless

Reading the December issue of MT made me feel I'd picked up the NME by mistake, except that *Marxism Today* lacks the incisive journalism of even that paper.

You had no less than three pieces about pop stars – which in itself doesn't bother me. The problem is quite simply the casual and overblown claims made by writers who sound like they've swallowed a book of cultural theory without spitting out the more outrageous bits.

In the case of the interview with Neneh Cherry: 'You fuse so many subjects and styles, that's quite subversive.' Subversive? Since when has pluralism in style been new or subversive? How do you measure its subversiveness? Who is it subversive against? This watered-down post-modern formalism cannot be allowed to wash over us unchecked.

Or: 'A lot of people are saying that men are confused right now and more useless than they were before.' Really? Who's saying this? All men? How can men be 'useless'? If this is meant to be a representation of feminist arguments then it is hopelessly inadequate.

The article on Nanci Griffith castigates record industries who market female singers by emphasising their visual appearance and then the author herself resorts to the feminine physiognomy: 'Her waif-like appearance suggests vulnerability.' Since when is a grown man characterised as a vulnerable waif due to his appearance?

I'm not singling out these two articles as I believe they are casualties of much new times

sloppiness. But if you are really serious about cultural developments then this should be reflected in your writing. Why even include the interviewer if what they say adds nothing? ●

Jessica Evans, Hackney

## Charter Begins At Home

If Martin Kettle's excellent article on the European Social Charter (MT Dec) had appeared under my name or that of any member of the Labour Common Market Safeguards Committee, it would have been dismissed as the ravings of an outdated nationalist crank. The fact that even a committed European like Mr Kettle urges caution in embracing the Charter should prompt some sober reflection among those who applaud it merely on the basis that Margaret Thatcher opposes it.

I will be the last person to deny that the Labour Party has a great deal to learn from its sister parties in Europe (their treatment of women being just one example). But internationalism should not automatically be equated with unquestioning acceptance of all Jacques Delors' nostrums. The scope for European co-operation is much broader than the Single European Act and the Social Charter, which, as Martin points out, will be very difficult to enforce in the Mediterranean EC states anyway.

So let us start building European socialist co-operation at the level of workplace and neighbourhood centre, rather than pinning our hopes on lofty documents emanating from the EC Commission. ●

Walter Cairns, Manchester

## Union Dispute

We all know it's not easy to write well and interestingly about industrial disputes. Too often the language, imagery and ideas associated with them lead to the triumphalist tones which pass as house style in most left-wing papers.

Even so, the current ambulance dispute deserves the effort and *Marxism Today's* response to date has been profoundly disappointing. December's issue was silent and January's brought us Beatrix Campbell's bad-tempered interview with Roger Poole.

It is not just that this contained no recognition that, for all the flaws, here we have a new form of trade unionism struggling to be born, it is more fundamentally that the interview is ill-informed.

The truth is that if the dispute is as elitist as Beatrix suggested, it would have been settled weeks ago, since the offer of a special payment to paramedics has been one of the many divisive tactics used by the management side.

This has been rejected by the trade unions concerned who have been quite insistent that this dispute is about a decent basic wage for all ambulance staff, whether officers, crews, or the predominantly female control assistants, whose current top salary is around £6,900. ●

Tricia Davis, Birmingham

## Re: Viz

What was the point of Peter Guttridge's article on Viz? He obviously knows nothing about it, and loathed the one copy he did read.

Millie Tant is 'sexist' in as much as it dares suggest some feminists are self-centred and boorish. If Guttridge had read any more copies he would know that 'Syd The Sexist' is far more subtle and acute in its attack on sexism than anything MT ever publishes.

Like most good and original things in this country, Viz comes defiantly from the provinces. MT suffers from terminal metropolitanism. ●

John Fletcher, Somerset

## Editorial Note:

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Cartoon: Nick Newman



Associated Press

Achille Occhetto was elected general secretary of the PCI two years ago. He is 53 years old.

# Splitting Image

In response to the extraordinary events of 1989, the Italian Communist Party has moved with remarkable speed and courage. It wants to reconstitute itself and change its name. **Eric Hobsbawm** interviews the man at the centre of the drama, **Achille Occhetto**, the leader of the PCI

A few days after the opening of the Berlin Wall last November, Achille Occhetto, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, proposed that the party should reconstruct itself and change its name. Next month, a special congress to be held in Bologna will discuss the proposal. It has wide support within the PCI, but there are powerful voices ranged against, including Alessandro Natta, the previous general secretary, and Pietro Ingrao. The PCI, the dominant party of the Italian Left with 27% of the vote and one of the great parties of the European Left, is at a historic turning point.