

**Reflections in 'Broken Mirrors': Transnational Women's
Narratives Published in Britain in the 2000s**

Meznah Saleh A. Alshamsan

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Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the literary work of three women writers published in Britain in the 2000s. The authors under consideration are Jackie Kay, a Scottish poet, novelist, and playwright; Nikita Lalwani who was born in India and raised in Cardiff, Wales; and Chinese-British novelist and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo. I argue that the critical and public celebration of writers like Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, and Andrea Levy in the 2000s has generated a rather narrow conception of women's writing by Black and Asian writers in Britain that has tended to concentrate on Afro-Caribbean or South Asian perspectives. Thus, I seek to complicate the dominant critical accounts of Black and Asian British writings in the 2000s by shifting attention from well-known writers like Smith, Levy, and Ali. Through this reorientation, I seek to intervene in debates about multiculturalism and Britishness.

The analysis of my chosen writers, Kay, Lalwani, and Guo, opens the way for a consideration of Black and Asian British writers in a post-devolution context that attends to how writers explore Englishness, Welshness, and Scottishness. It also allows an exploration of mobility, the cultural politics of language, and the complex ways in which these writers explore identity. By discussing these writers together, I aim to reconsider the 2000s by focusing on shifting notions of identity, changing concepts of Britishness and belonging, and how they are constantly redefined and challenged across different genres: the novel, memoir, and short story.

Declarations and Statements

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This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Introduction

[N]one of us saw this juggernaut of racism approaching. It is coming down the main roads and the slip roads and even beautiful country lanes at huge astonishing speed. We have to stop it. We cannot wait to cross the border. We cannot wait to feel at home. (Jackie Kay, *Poets on Tour*)¹

The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed. [...] [I]t was precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative for me. The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*)²

In this thesis, I explore two of Kay's works published in the 2000s – her memoir *Red Dust Road* (2010) and her short story collection *Wish I Was Here* (2006) – along with Nikita Lalwani's first novel *Gifted* (2007), and Xiaolu Guo's first novel written in English, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). Each of these writers tackles issues of racism, belonging, and identity in relation to one of the constituent nations of Britain. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay narrates her search for her birth parents and the racism she faced growing up in Scotland. Kay was born in the 1960s in Edinburgh, her birth mother is a nurse from the Scottish Highlands and her birth father is from Nigeria. She was adopted by Helen and John Kay and grew up in the suburbs of Glasgow. In *Wish I was Here*, Kay presents various representations of ordinary people struggling with ending relationships, loneliness, and identity. Lalwani's *Gifted* depicts the story of Rumi, a young girl talented in mathematics, as she navigates the complications of her identity between Cardiff and India, her ancestral home. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo narrates a year in the life of 23 year old Chinese woman, Zhuang or Z, who decides to move to London to learn English. In

¹ Jackie Kay, 'Poets on Tour: Reeling After the Referendum', *The Guardian*, 2 July 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jul/02/poets-tour-reeling-after-the-referendum>> [accessed 12 January 2024].

² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1991), p. 11.

this thesis, I discuss works from various genres (the novel, memoir, and short story) to investigate how these writers use themes like language and mobility to represent complex, fluid identities and challenge stereotypical understanding of concepts of Britishness and belonging in the 2000s.

I have chosen to discuss Lalwani, Kay, and Guo because each of them offers a distinct lens through which an image of Britain can be seen. I will examine these works in a manner that is similar to Rushdie's conceptualization of the 'broken mirror', as mirrors that often reflect 'fragmentations' and 'shards of memory'. In his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie provides his own account of living between two cultures, Britain and the Indian Subcontinent. Rushdie talks about the difficulty of writing about a culture as an outsider and describes such attempts as dealing with broken mirrors 'whose fragments have been irretrievably lost'.³ Rushdie's 'broken mirrors' imply the multiplicity inherent in identity and resistance to reducing identity to a singular dominant reflection, especially for writers from Black or ethnic backgrounds. Rushdie's sense of twoness and multiple reflections is similar to Du Bois's conceptualization of 'double consciousness'. In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*,⁴ Du Bois argues that people living between different cultures in a racist society often struggle to navigate their identities both as individuals and as part of a racialized group. Focusing on the particular situation of African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois explains that such individuals are always looking at their selves through the eyes of the other. Both Rushdie and Du Bois tap into the concept of the duality of identity, where individuals are often forced to negotiate multiple reflections of their identities while being alienated from the mainstream culture. Lalwani, Kay, and Guo, each offer a different lens to reflect upon what it means to live between different cultures and to attempt to claim belonging in Britain's rather alienating cultural surroundings.

This struggle between different reflections of identity and alienation from the mainstream culture can be seen in an interesting scene that is repeated in the work of all three writers discussed in this thesis. Lalwani, Kay, and Guo each depict one of their characters in a pub either sitting in a dark corner or being publicly signalled as a foreigner. In Lalwani's novel, Rumi's father, Mahesh, is depicted sitting in a dimly lit corner of a pub in

³ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 11.

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Cardiff feeling small and invisible: '[Mahesh] felt small, uncultivated somehow, shrunken' (p. 124). In Guo's novel, Z does not feel involved in the conversation and is overwhelmed and objectified by 'many singles, desperately mans' (p. 86) who surround her as she sits alone in a pub in London. In her memoir, Kay describes how a woman in a bar called her a 'foreign-looking bugger!' (p. 193) with complete disregard to her Scottish accent. Since the pub is a public place that holds a special spot in British heritage and culture, presenting these characters as marginalised in such space places them, in a sense, on the periphery of national belonging, a discussion that is intensified by their connection to Welshness, Englishness, and Scottishness. Thus, these characters are forced to renegotiate their identities and sense of belonging, while constantly being dismissed by mainstream culture as others.

Each of the writers discussed in the thesis offers distinctive reflections on identity, of what it means to belong to Britain, and more specifically to Wales, Scotland, and England, and the struggle required to achieve that belonging. These reflections alter according to what angle you look through. At times they are reflections informed by memories and stories of the past, stories that are inherited and passed on by parents and other members of the family as in Kay's and Lalwani's work or stories that are creatively imagined and created as in Guo's narrative. At other times, such reflections are distorted by social prejudice, racism, and intensified identity struggle. By examining these representations and reflections side by side, I aim to tease out the ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties inherent in imagining Britain in the 2000s. Focusing on Britain rather than the United Kingdom, this thesis analyses Wales, Scotland, and England as the three geographical nations covered by the limits of this project.⁵

Lalwani, Kay, and Guo engage with the image of reflections and the metaphor of the mirror, both in direct and indirect ways, in an imaginative manner that seems to show the unstable quality of identity and belonging and offer fresh, challenging ways of depicting Britain. For instance, Kay's non-linear organization of her memoir *Red Dust Road* mimics

⁵ I had to make the decision not to include Northern Ireland because of the difficulties I faced when attempting to find an appropriate work. Additionally, the numerous political struggles, and social changes that have impacted the nation since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the subsequent devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1999 would have made comprehensive coverage challenging within the time and word count limits of this project.

glimpses of a reflection seen in a mirror: she moves between the past and the present, between Scotland, England, and Nigeria, between her childhood and adulthood and jumps from one scene to another. Kay offers only segments of her life in a manner that challenges readers, forcing them to rethink issues of identity and belonging. In *Wish I Was Here*, the characters are often depicted standing in front of a mirror unable to recognize the reflection they see, a scene that echoes their internal struggles and cultural anxieties. Also, in her memoir and in many interviews and essays, Kay often talks about mirror reflections as a way of understanding her identity as Scottish and 'other': 'I am not the same colour as my mother, my father, my grandmother, my grandfather, my friends [...] My own face in the mirror was not the face I had in my head.'⁶ Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is organized in a diary like format that only offers snap shots of Z's life in London. Near the end of the novel Z is depicted in an airplane returning to China, looking at her own reflection and concluding that she can no longer recognize herself. The year Z spent between London, Wales, and Europe has altered her identity completely. In *Gifted*, Lalwani's protagonist, Rumi, is always sitting behind a window staring at her own reflection mixed with Cardiff's city space, where she 'could see the world outside, muted through the double-glazing' (p. 136). She feels trapped inside this reflection and is unable to escape. These recurring depictions of reflections and misrecognition show that identity is unstable and can never be reduced to a narrow definition. These works' engagement with Welshness, Scottishness, and Englishness troubles any configuration of hybrid identity. Looking at these narratives side by side gives a wider sense of what it means to be British especially when one's identity stretches far beyond the nation's borders.

The way these works depict diverse trajectories of identity manifestation, and the way multiple, interconnected themes, such as language, movement, and search for belonging, recur within the narratives adds to our understanding of Black and Asian British writing in the 2000s. For example, Lalwani, Kay, and Guo use movement to create self-aware, cosmopolitan characters who can voice their own identity struggle. All three writers link movement and travel with freedom and self-determination. For instance, in her short fiction, Jackie Kay uses movement to develop multiple character perspectives that associate personal autonomy with travel through individual journeys. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay traces

⁶ Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Bath: Absolute, 1997), p. 9.

routes and uses movement to create connections to her ancestral village in Nigeria. In *Gifted*, Lalwani shows how Rumi's exploration of Cardiff's streets, libraries, stations, and market is integral to her journey towards the creation of a distinct identity that mixes both her Welsh and Indian heritage. Similarly, for Guo's character Z, travel between China, London, Europe, and Wales helps her articulate her complex identity and voice her determination to become an artist in her own right and to choose where to live.

Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's focus on border crossing movement, whether physical or cultural, and finding a sense of belonging between different countries and cultures is very significant. In an article published in *the Guardian*, cited above, just a few days after the 2016 referendum results were announced, Jackie Kay described the UK's decision to leave the European Union as a 'trauma' and a 'blow to the country'. Kay explains that 'We cannot wait to cross the border. We cannot wait to feel at home'.⁷ The correlation Kay establishes between border crossing and feeling at home is one of the main themes discussed in this thesis. In Kay's explanation, it seems as if that the racism she has spent her entire career fighting against won the moment Britain decided to shut its borders and cut the connection to Europe. Racism and social prejudice have caused Kay to feel un-homed in her own country. She explains that the only way to combat such feelings is by breaking social boundaries and limitations to achieve belonging. Reading Kay's words after Brexit informs my understanding of the subtle forms of racism that the writers in this thesis engage with in the 2000s. From my perspective, these earlier forms of racism and cultural discrimination planted the seeds for the growth of social prejudice that led to Brexit. This is particularly evident in the post-Brexit aftermath, which has been characterised by intensified struggle, fragmentation, and exclusion within the British society,⁸ (I will further explore this point at the end of each chapter and in the thesis conclusion). All the writers discussed here attach

⁷ Kay, 'Poets on tour'.

⁸ Many writers have engaged with issues of racism and the marginalisation of the EU immigrants in Britain, among the most famous is Ali Smith's 'Seasons' quartet. This is also clear in the developing genre of 'BrexLit' fiction which engages with Brexit and the post-Brexit landscape. See for example: Kristian Shaw, *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Barbara Korte, and Laura Lojo, *Borders and Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019); Robert Eaglestone, *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018); María Alonso, 'Posthuman Intersections in BrexLit: Representing Migration in Contemporary British Fiction', *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2023, 1–17; Marc Farrant, 'The Agonistic Imagination: The Illiberal and Pluralist Possibilities of Contemporary BrexLit Fiction', *Continuum*, 2024, 1–13.

great importance to freedom of movement and border crossing, deeming it a foundation for finding a sense of identity and belonging.

Rushdie's theorization of the broken mirror and the idea of multiple reflections and fragmentation is further complicated by Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's creative engagement with multiple languages to give expression to hybrid identities. Lalwani, Kay, and Guo are unapologetic about their use of dialects and non-standard English forms; they celebrate their characters' difference and complex identities. For instance, Guo generates humour through language play, notably in her descriptions of famous landmarks in London. For example, she calls Big Ben 'the big stupid clock' because Ben sounds like the Chinese word for stupid. This mode of depicting the city's landmarks seems to be a way of forcing the city to accommodate her difference. Z's struggle to learn English at the beginning of the narrative becomes a source of empowerment in the end through creative self-expression and her wish to become a well-known writer in 'England, Scotland, and even Wales' (p. 294). In Lalwani's *Gifted*, Rumi is able to create connection and imagine stories about her ancestral home, India, through listening to her mother sing nursery rhymes to her young brother in Hindi. Language is also depicted as a source of miscommunication and disconnection through Rumi's mother's refusal to speak English when she is angry and Rumi's inability to understand Hindi. Kay presents her Scottish accent and her Black British identity as inseparable by highlighting her struggle with racial profiling based on her skin colour. For these writers and their characters multiple languages provide multiple points of identification and multiple possible identity expressions.

In this thesis, I will examine the combined complexities in Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's exploration of identities in an attempt to complicate critical narratives about Black and Asian British writing in the 2000s. These writers' engagement with identities seems to defy categorization and offer a fruitful terrain for the exploration of issues of Britishness, race, ethnicity, and belonging. Lalwani, Kay, and Guo tell stories that draw upon languages, histories, and people from various parts of the world, in connection to one of the British nations: Wales, Scotland, and England. Jackie Kay, for instance, was born in Britain, spent all her life there and was brought up by white Scottish parents in Scotland. In her writing she depicts her struggle with misrecognition and discrimination. She shows how her Scottish accent is not heard, and she is often cast as a foreigner due to her skin colour. By contrast,

Nikita Lalwani was born in a small village in India and grew up in Cardiff, Wales. Her novel *Gifted* mixes Hindi and English words to challenge conventional perception of identity and belonging. Xiaolu Guo was born and raised in the Chinese province of Zhejiang and spoke mainly Chinese until she decided to move to London in her 20s, learn English, become a British citizen, and write her first novel in broken English. Guo often depicts her own and her protagonists' creative struggle between different languages. All three writers live between and within different cultures, languages, and social contexts that are expressed through their writings. Keeping in mind the complexities of identity and identification,⁹ none of these writers can be described as solely Welsh, Scottish or English.

One of the aims of this thesis is to call for alternative ways of understanding Welsh, Scottish, and English identities by examining representations that depart from the stereotypical modes of British multiculturalism that dominated the 2000s. The texts have been chosen because they depict characters who are mainly geographically located in one of the British nations, Wales, Scotland, and England, in texts that depict strong engagement with space and landscape. Thus, the thesis is divided into three chapters, which explore three of the four British nations: Wales, Scotland, and England. Drawing on Robert Lee's argument that 'formulations such as Asian-British and Caribbean-British can be further "particularised" into, say, Cardiff-Bengali or Brixton Jamaican, meaning that the terms contain their own freight of heterogeneity and tension',¹⁰ I will question the formulation of Britishness in the 2000s. I will attempt to show how the works discussed in this thesis depict an unstable sense of British identity that challenges the literary and critical focus on London and the dominant accounts of multiculturalism in the 2000s. This sense of Britishness is further complicated by the political transformation of Britain at the turn of the century after the devolution of Wales and Scotland.

The works discussed in this thesis were published in the 2000s. I see the 2000s as an important literary period that is marked by a surging interest in what is known as the

⁹ The reference here is to Charlotte Williams' description of mixed-race individuals' identity as being imposed by social and cultural structures and the difficulty of creating a sense of identity while living between different cultures and countries. I aim to develop this discussion along with analysis of her memoir *Sugar and Slate* (2002) later in this introduction.

¹⁰ In: *British Asian Fiction: Framing The Contemporary*, ed. by Neil Murphy and Wai-Chew Sim (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), p. 3.

multicultural novel and when debates about national identity and what constitutes Britishness intensified. This period witnessed the unprecedented success of Zadie Smith's first novel *White Teeth* (2000), and later the emergence and popularity of writers like Monica Ali and Andrea Levy. These writers have attracted national and global interest and appear in much of the critical work about Black and Asian British writers published during the period. The criticism focusing on Smith's, Ali's, and Levy's fiction has effectively driven literary discourse forwards, leading to progress in terms of the recognition of the multicultural novel's importance in transforming culture and offering an alternative formulation of British identities that does not adhere to the traditional dominant discourses.¹¹ However, it has also led to a rather narrow conception of women's writing by British Black and Asian¹² writers that has tended to concentrate on Afro-Caribbean or South Asian perspectives.

In January 2000, Zadie Smith published her first novel *White Teeth*. Almost instantly, the novel became a national best seller, won several awards, and is acclaimed for its depiction of diversity and multicultural Britain. Following in the same footsteps, Monica Ali published her first novel *Brick Lane* in 2003 and was celebrated by many critics as the 'new Zadie Smith'.¹³ Both writers appeared in the 2003 Granta list of the best young British writers. A year later in 2004 Andrea Levy published her fourth novel *Small Island* which subsequently won many prizes.¹⁴ All three novels were later adapted for TV. Smith's and Levy's novels were made into short series that were broadcast in the BBC in 2002 and 2009 respectively, while Ali's novel was made into a film directed by Sarah Gavron in 2007. The legacy of these works lived long after the publication of the novels. For example, in November 2018 *White Teeth* was adapted for the stage by Stephen Sharkey and performed in the Kiln theatre in London. And in 2022 the novel was included in The Big Jubilee Read,¹⁵ alongside Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. The list showcased 70 books by writers published in

¹¹ Mark Stein, 'Cultures of Hybridity: Reading Black British Literature', *Kunapipi*, 20.2 (1998), 76–89 (p. 82).

¹² I acknowledge the different arguments around these terms. In this thesis I will mainly base my usage of such terms on Susheila Nasta's and Mark Stein's recent argument in the *Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (2020), that such terms are used only as a frame of reference rather than to imply or impose certain racial or ethnic affiliation.

¹³ See: James Procter, 'New Ethnicities, the Novel, and the Burdens of Representations', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by James F. English (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 101–20.

¹⁴ For example: the Orange Prize for Fiction, The Whitbread Novel Award, The Whitbread Book of the Year Award, and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

¹⁵ Available online at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2Ynpj933DJ2YG5nsMS6fn8k/a-literary-celebration-of-queen-elizabeth-iis-record-breaking-reign>> [accessed 20 February 2024].

the Commonwealth since 1952 and was released by the BBC in celebration of Queen Elizabeth II platinum jubilee. The list was mainly compiled from suggestions from readers, and later judged by a panel of librarians, booksellers, and various literary specialists including Susheila Nasta. Nasta commented in an interview with the BBC that only books that are 'good and equally well received' were chosen.¹⁶ Thus, the list once again attest to the popularity of Smith's and Levy's novels and shows the power of publicity in affecting what is categorized as good literary work.

All three novels, Smith's *White Teeth*, Ali's *Brick Lane*, and Levy's *Small Island*, received positive public reception. *White Teeth* was described by Stephanie Merritt in the *Observer* as offering 'a very optimistic vision'¹⁷ of Britain and *Brick Lane* was praised by Geraldine Bedell in a review for the *Observer* for its 'exploration of a community that is so quintessentially British that it has given us our national dish.'¹⁸ Based on Bedell's review, it is easy to assume that one thing that contributed to the popularity of such novels is their representation of easily digested stories and palatable narratives about multicultural Britain that conformed to what readers want to hear. These works offer a somewhat polished image of immigrants' life in Britain or rather, in Smith's own words, a representation of a 'happy Multicultural land'.¹⁹ Although the term could be ironic it seems to feed into a representation of Britain as a hegemonic place where immigrants can easily achieve assimilation and better their lives. And, as James Procter argues, these novels' 'mainstream popularity' stems from a wider, public, critical, and commercial interest in 'Caribbean and South Asian Cultures in Britain' at the turn of the millennium.²⁰ Therefore, I aim to shift the attention to voices from the 2000s that have not been given enough critical attention.

The argument outlined in this thesis makes the case for a widening of the scope of the critical conversation about Black and Asian British writing of the 2000s and debates

¹⁶ In: Harriet Sherwood, 'The God of Small Things to Shuggie Bain: the Queen's jubilee book list', *The Guardian*, 18 April 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/apr/18/the-god-of-small-things-to-shuggie-bain-the-queens-jubilee-book-list>> [accessed 14 November 2023].

¹⁷ Stephanie Merritt, 'She's Young, Black, British—and the First Publishing Sensation of the Millennium', *The Observer*, 16 Jan 2000, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jan/16/fiction.zadiesmith>> [accessed 20 October 2023].

¹⁸ Geraldine Bedell, 'Full of East End Promise', *Observer*, 15 June 2003 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jun/15/fiction.features1>> [accessed 20 October 2023].

¹⁹ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), p. 398.

²⁰ Procter, 'New Ethnicities', p. 111.

about multiculturalism, Britishness, Englishness, Welshness, and Scottishness in the period. In *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994), a discussion of the 1980s, Kobena Mercer argues that Black British writers have reconfigured the cultural landscape in a significant way, transforming it and challenging accepted knowledge by pointing out how diverse and pluralist any claim to Britishness actually is.²¹ I aim to draw on this argument in my analysis of the 2000s, showing the need to expand the critical work published about Black and Asian British writers by looking at writers like Lalwani, Kay, and Guo who engage with alternative approaches to identity and belonging.

Several academics and literary critics including Graham Huggan, Kristian Shaw, and Corinne Fowler have pointed out that commercial considerations have often driven which novels have acquired attention, determining whose stories are told and shaping the narrative concerning multiculturalism.²² Although this approach to diasporic literature and the multicultural novel has shaped the current discourse surrounding it, it has also fundamentally limited the parameters of critical discourse about Black and Asian British writings by focusing on a handful of commercially successful texts. This thesis will make the case for the rejection of the current narrow lens, that tends to focus on certain famous writers from specific cultural backgrounds, through which literature in the 2000s is viewed. As such, in selecting *Gifted* (2007) by Nikita Lalwani, *Red Dust Road* (2010) and *Wish I Was Here* (2006) by Jackie Kay, and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) by Xiaolu Guo, this analysis advocates for a greater level of inclusion of Black and Asian British writers published in the post-devolutionary period. It will build on Corinne Fowler's assertion that there is a 'need to pay greater attention to Black British novels that engage with the specificities of non-metropolitan glocalities,'²³ arguing that more attention must be given to diverse experiences that represent underexplored dimensions of racism and racial discrimination and offer new notions of what it means to be Welsh, Scottish, and English.

²¹ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), pp. 73-75; Stein, 'Cultures of Hybridity', p. 82.

²² Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 116; Kristian Shaw, 'The Cosmopolitan Value of the Multicultural Novel', in *The Novel as Network: Forms, Ideas, Commodities*, ed. by Tim Lanzendorfer and Corinna Norrick-Ruhl (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 51-68 (p. 54).

²³ Corrine Fowler, 'A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black British Writing', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43.3 (2008), 75-94 (p. 89).

Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's writings do not only offer a complicated, unsettled understanding of identity but they also shift the focus from London and Englishness, which has been such a prominent element of the writings of the most feted Black and Asian British writers of the same period: Ali, Smith, and Levy. For instance, Andrea Levy's depiction of London as the centre of the empire in *Small Island* can be seen at the beginning of the novel in Queenie Bligh's account of how she experienced 'the whole world at [her] feet'²⁴ during a visit to the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. Smith's *White Teeth* is celebrated for its portrayal of London as a multicultural place and its engagement with the concept of Englishness, as seen in the oft-quoted words spoken by Alsana Iqbal: 'Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy tale!'²⁵ This portrayal of London as the great metropolis is also present in critical work published during the 2000s. For instance, both John Clement Ball's *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (2004) and John McLeod's *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the metropolis* (2004) engage with the idea of London as 'the heart of the empire'²⁶ and a signifier of British cultural and political superiority. Clement Ball argues that for immigrants London is a 'mythologized object of dream and desire'.²⁷ He contends that writers who engage with London, like Smith, often give their characters the 'pride of place'²⁸ and depict their preference to ground local roots rather than engage with mobility and 'international routes',²⁹ an idea that I argue against in my discussion of Guo's novel. This critical and literary focus on London and the portrayal of South Asian and Caribbean perspectives, presents a rather limited perspective on Black and Asian British women's writing. Therefore, this thesis aims to engage with alternative modes of viewing the 2000s that spotlight diverse voices and experiences that engage with places other than London.

In his book *Dwelling Places* (2003), James Procter comments on Stuart Hall's use of the term 'English experience' to describe the Black experience 'since the mid 1980s', and asks what 'is Black Englishness? What difference does it contain, and how does it differ from

²⁴ Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Tinder Press, 2015), p. 6.

²⁵ Smith, p. 236.

²⁶ See: John McLeod, *Postcolonial London Rewriting the Metropolis* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), p. 5 and John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 4.

²⁷ Clement Ball, p. 6.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 236.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

black Welshness, Scottishness, Irishness or Britishness?’³⁰ Procter continues to describe how ‘growing calls for political autonomy across the United Kingdom’s different national communities, the rise of Welsh and Scottish nationalism [...] highlight widening discrepancies across Britain’s supposedly homogenous national landscape’ and ‘signal the need to attend to local and regional differences.’³¹ In this thesis, I aim to investigate these ‘local and regional differences’ that constitute a fragmented rather than unified Britain. I chose to move away from what Sarah Illott calls novels produced for a mainstream ‘imagined audience’,³² like Smith’s *White Teeth*, to works that offer a more challenging way of imagining postcolonial Britain. Such works seem to lack appropriate critical and public attention. Even Jackie Kay, who is a high profile writer, is still not well known outside Scotland and England.³³

This thesis forms the first sustained investigation of Nikita Lalwani, Jackie Kay, and Xiaolu Guo side by side in relation to a discussion of the broader picture of postcolonial Britain, especially in the way these writers deal with racism, identity negotiation between multiple homes, using inherited stories to reshape the present, and reimagining futures of belonging to Britain. I will investigate how these works offer multiple fragments of three of the British nations that move beyond London to include other locations and other forms of devolutionary identities. Read together, they offer a new way of understanding Britishness in the 2000s.

Devolution and British Literary Culture

Debates about what constitutes Britishness were at the centre of national consciousness through conflicts underpinning political discourse at the turn of the millennium. For decades, concepts of Britishness and belonging have been defined and redefined through

³⁰ James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 2.

³¹ Ibid, p. 3.

³² Sarah Illott, *New Postcolonial British Genres: Shifting the Boundaries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 96.

³³ See: Nancy K. Gish, ‘Absent Voices: Modern Women Writers in Celtic Countries’, *Literature Compass* 10.1 (2013), 45–52 (p. 47).

political movements and in critical and literary writing. Take, as examples, Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, which features his explicit expression of racism, and Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric on Englishness and the need to restore 'English values' in the 1980s. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, thinkers like Paul Gilroy (*There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, 1987) and Stuart Hall (*Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996), and creative writers like Hanif Kureishi, began a new literary and critical antiracism movement that strove to establish a more inclusive conceptualization of Britishness. These writings placed a much-needed focus on Black and Asian British writings. In mid-1990s, Tony Blair's Labour party advertised its manifesto, entitled 'New Labour, New Life for Britain', with the goal of 'celebrating Britishness'. All these political changes have instigated literary and critical responses.

It was only in the early 2000s, and amid these calls for the celebration and reinvention of Britishness, that second-generation writers born or raised in Britain, including Smith, Ali, and many others, started publishing their first novels to popular and critical acclaim. These works made the field of Black British literature more prominent as an academic discipline. However, the literary works that came to public prominence in this period offer a somewhat polished image of immigrants' life in Britain – or rather, as argued by Sarah Illott, they 'reflect a desire to represent a happy multicultural society,'³⁴ which echoes Smith's 'happy Multicultural land'.³⁵ And many of these multicultural novels that deal with immigration as an issue, mirror conflicts that Christian Mair notes as being carefully arranged.³⁶

This tendency to draw an optimistic image of Britishness can be seen in the ending of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. The novel concludes with Nazneen, the protagonist, ice-skating in a sari with her daughter, while her best friend Razia asserts 'This is England [...] You can do whatever you like.'³⁷ This scene is celebrated for its depiction of the ease with which Nazneen is seemingly assimilated into mainstream British culture and for its 'unconditional

³⁴ Illott, *New postcolonial British Genres*, p. 172.

³⁵ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 398.

³⁶ Christian Mair, 'Language, Code, and Symbol: The Changing Roles of Jamaican Creole in Diaspora Communities', *AAA—Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 28.2 (2003), 231–48 (p. 235).

³⁷ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004), p. 492.

optimism'³⁸ in depicting multicultural Britain. Similarly, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, which depicts an array of characters who allow for maximum engagement with diverse cultural groups,³⁹ is often praised for its 'definitive representation of twentieth century British multiculturalism'.⁴⁰ These works paint a picture of a homogeneous, unified, multicultural British identity that centres around immigrants' experience in metropolitan England.

These works' representation of London as a melting pot of ethnic and cultural diversity is supported by many critical writings of the period, such as John Clement Ball's *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (2004), which focuses on Caribbean and South Asian writers and their experiences in and of the English capital, and John McLeod's *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), in which London is often referred to as the capital of the empire. London has always been a major theme in postcolonial writings, as attested by many critics including Sara Upstone in her book chapter, 'Negotiations of London as Imperial Urban Space in the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel'.⁴¹ Upstone argues that celebrated novels, such as Smith's *White Teeth*, 'epitomize a new generation of postcolonial urban literature centred upon London.'⁴² In such novels, the representation of London seems to revolve around a comparison with distant homelands powered by a wish to return.

Such representation of easy immigrant assimilation does not do justice to the complex notions of mixed-race identities during the 2000s and the ways in which Black British and Asian British writers have responded to political change. Black and Asian British literature encompasses many voices and perspectives that challenge any notion of a homogeneous British identity. These writers complicate understanding of belonging and disrupt the racialized boundaries of Englishness, Welshness, Scottishness, and Northern Irishness. This thesis is my attempt to demonstrate the need to broaden the literary and critical imagination of Britishness by catering to national specificities of Englishness,

³⁸ Chris Weedon, 'Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women's Writing', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 2.1 (2008), 17–35, (p. 17).

³⁹ See: Mair, 'Language, Code, and Symbol', pp. 231–48.

⁴⁰ Joseph Jackson, *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 39.

⁴¹ Sara Upstone, 'Negotiations of London as Imperial Urban Space in the Contemporary Postcolonial Novel', in *Urban Space and Cityscapes: Perspectives from Modern and Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Christoph Lindner (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 88–100.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 91.

Scottishness, and Welshness as the three nationalities present on the island of Great Britain. Building on Robert Crawford's 1990s argument that the celebration of a reinvented Britain did not adequately register Scottish and Welsh national experiences,⁴³ I will attempt to show how the political devolution of Scotland and Wales is explored in the writings of Black and Asian women writers. I will also provide a theoretical framework for this thesis and show how the critical canon is still limited, as there are many voices that have not received enough attention.

The political devolution of Scotland and Wales started with the referendum act of 1997 and later the opening of both the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament (1999). The way writers and critics have responded to devolution informs our understanding of Britishness as a contested identity in the 2000s. I will start my analysis by reviewing the critical work published in the 2000s. I will then examine the Welsh and Scottish literary scenes in the post-devolutionary period.

Kristian Shaw (2021) argues that devolution has affected England more than any other nation in Britain, insofar as it has made it extremely difficult to identify a sense of national identity.⁴⁴ Writers and literary critics during the post-devolutionary period have attempted to renegotiate concepts of Englishness and Britishness; however, writings that are culturally, socially, and geographically centred in England often blur the lines between Englishness and Britishness.

At the turn of the century, many critical studies exploring Black British and Asian British literature were published; examples include James Procter's *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (2003), Mark Stein's *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), Kadija (George) Sesay's edited collection, *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature* (2005), R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey's *Black British Writing* (2004), and Sara Upstone's *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (2010). Together, these works have drawn attention to Black British and Asian British writers and their experiences. However, they present a rather loose definition of Britishness. Britishness

⁴³ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 309.

⁴⁴ Kristian Shaw, *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project*, 1st edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 137.

in such texts is used as a celebratory term that is often associated with the reinvention of a unified nation.

For example, in the introduction to *Black British Writing* (2004), Arana and Ramey adopt a celebratory tone to tackle a 'reinvented' Britain. Arana and Ramey argue that this reinvention of Britain is 'sounded by the new black British writers'.⁴⁵ These are writers that are '[b]orn in England, Scotland or Wales, often to racially mixed families, they do not write about their *staying power* because they are not the ones who migrated. Britain, they affirm, *is* their country'.⁴⁶ Britishness is treated as an umbrella term that seems to unite all ethnic minority writers. Also, in *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (2010),⁴⁷ Sara Upstone's discussion of Asian British literature focuses mainly on South Asian writers in relation to England, including such authors as Monica Ali, Meera Syal, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie. Upstone's use of the term Britishness seems to maintain the celebratory tone associated with the term. Upstone does not make any reference to national differences within Britain. Even when discussing Scottish writer Suhayl Saadi, the reader's attention is drawn to the way that 'to be Asian in Scotland is to have a particular significance lacking in the British context'. Upstone attributes Saadi's wish to not identify as British to favouring 'narrow national affiliation' over 'broader, more fluid' Britishness.⁴⁸ This critical tendency to support Britishness over specific national identities can also be seen in the way Mark Stein, in his book *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2004), theorizes Black British writings in relation to the *Bildungsroman* and shows how the texts he discusses help transform Britain's society and culture.⁴⁹ However, Stein seems to be very liberal in his use of Englishness as a substitute for Britishness when discussing writers like Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, and Meera Syal.

Philip Tew in *The Contemporary British Novel* (2007) attributes the 'critical conflation of Englishness with Britain' to the fact that England is larger than all the other nations and

⁴⁵ Victoria R. Arana and Lauri Ramey, eds, *Black British Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1–7 (p. 2).

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 3.

⁴⁷ Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010). *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 191.

⁴⁹ I examine the *Bildungsroman* in my discussion of Lalwani's *Gifted* in Chapter One.

more 'culturally dominant'.⁵⁰ Tew explains that this critical conflation has distorted the 'apprehensions of Britishness'.⁵¹ Therefore, Britishness became an umbrella term that represented the unity of the nation. Similarly, Dave Gunning (2004), in a discussion of Black British literary criticism, argues that the British nation's capability 'to act as a determinant of literary and cultural meanings is deferred. [...] There is a failure to locate the nation as simultaneously existing as a contained entity unto itself. "British" is invoked while being concurrently denied any explanatory power.'⁵² Gunning continues to argue that 'the concept of the British nation' should always be kept in mind when analysing Black British works like Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* (2003) instead of only relying on 'transnational focus'.⁵³ Gunning suggests that the loose definitions of Britishness by many critics have failed to register specific national challenges.

There are many critics who have engaged with devolution and tried to move away from a focus on the English capital. For instance, almost a decade after publishing his book *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), John McLeod moves away from an overly optimistic representation of multicultural London to map the English North.⁵⁴ In a book chapter entitled 'English Somewheres: Caryl Phillips and the English North' (2011), McLeod justifies his focus on the north as a way of analysing a place that is not 'idealized or glibly celebrated'⁵⁵ like London. Similarly, James Procter, in his book *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writings* (2003), calls for a greater awareness of the differences between Britishness and Englishness and makes the critical remark that it is not the same 'to be black in London as it is in Llandudno'.⁵⁶ Through this observation and his conceptualization of different 'diaspora spaces', Procter progresses the understanding of Black British writing. The critical gap highlighted by Procter's comment merits an investigation of the national and regional specifics of Black and Asian British writers in the 2000s.

⁵⁰ Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 35.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 36.

⁵² Dave Gunning, 'Anti-Racism, the Nation-State and Contemporary Black British Literature', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 39.2 (2004), 29–43 (p. 31).

⁵³ Ibid, p. 41.

⁵⁴ McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ John McLeod, 'English Somewheres: Caryl Phillips and the English North', in *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.14–27 (p. 27).

⁵⁶ Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 1.

In the last chapter of the book, entitled 'The North', Procter discussed some of Jackie Kay's poems and describes a tension between 'the black Scottish speaker and the English south' that highlights 'internal, regional, and national differences'.⁵⁷ Although Procter pays some attention to national specifics, his discussion seems to blur Britain's (internal) borders. He presents Scotland in discussion alongside Bradford and Blackpool. Thus, he again hints at a concept of Britain as a homogeneous nation, flattening national differences that give depth and richness to our understanding of identities.

Lynne Pearce, in *Devolving Identities: Feminist Reading in Home and Belonging* (2000), argues that debates about devolution have not paid enough attention to 'feminist issues'.⁵⁸ The book presents many essays by writers from different British nations that engage with themes of home and belonging and explores the connection between gender and national identity in the devolutionary period. It adopts a feminist approach that allows each of the contributors to convey her own experience and struggle in mediating their identities between different cultures. In the introduction, Pearce seems to favour a homogenous British identity and is very critical of Black British writers' expressions of nostalgia for distant 'homelands'. She calls for a greater focus on the mediation of the British nations through space and on writings that see the British nations as 'destination-homes'.⁵⁹

Corinne Fowler's 2008 article 'A Tale of Two Novels: Developing a Devolved Approach to Black British Writing' compares the success of Zadie Smith's London-based novel *White Teeth* (2000) and the commercial failure of Joe Pemberton's Manchester-based novel *Forever and Ever Amen* (2008). Fowler examines the cultural and publication factors that affected these novels and argues that Smith's London setting contributed to the novel's success, while Pemberton's northern England location did not. However, Fowler's call for a 'devolved' critical engagement with a 'fuller range of British writing'⁶⁰ is somewhat problematic given that Fowler only engages with a single nation, England, and does not discuss any of the devolved nations. In this thesis I aim to move away from a

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 190.

⁵⁸ Lynne Pearce, ed., *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home and Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

⁵⁹ Ibid, pp. 35-6.

⁶⁰ Fowler, p. 90.

conceptualization of a homogeneous British identity to a discussion of writers as multiple reflections and refractions of the three different nations that constitute Britain.

Devolution allowed greater recognition of national literatures and brought to the fore the distinct identities, cultures, and languages of these nations. According to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2000), devolution in both Scotland and Wales raised the issue of ethnicity, showing that 'a concept of ethnicity based on ancestral rights, rather than other modes of belonging, has gained the upper hand',⁶¹ which continues to complicate issues of belonging for individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds. In *A Tolerant Nation?: Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Wales* (2003), Charlotte Williams argues that, due to intense focus on the 'broader reframing of Britishness', issues of identity and belonging of 'black and ethnic minorities on the level of sub- state nation' are still underrepresented.⁶² Williams explains that one of the advantages of devolution is that it gave an opportunity 'to rework discourse of race and ethnicity, to reconfigure the narrative of nation and national identity.'⁶³ In what follows, I identify how writers in Scotland and Wales have challenged these concepts of belonging and 'ethnicity based on ancestral right' in the post-devolutionary period. My focus will be on women writers, in keeping with Pearce's argument that more attention should be paid to feminist issues in relations to debates about devolution.

In Wales, critics have been very optimistic about devolution and the way it 'marks a period of reconciliation between Wales's complex political, cultural, and linguistic past and its aspirations for a future which reflects the new political meaning ascribed to the country.'⁶⁴ According to Darren Chetty, Elan Grug Muse, Hanan Issa, and Iestyn Tyne, devolution 'gave everyone in Wales political citizenship regardless of who they were.'⁶⁵ This political recognition inspired writers to challenge, enrich, and inform debates about

⁶¹ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, 'Muddled Leaders and the Future of the British National Identity', *The Political Quarterly* (London. 1930), 71.1 (2000), 26–30 (p. 26).

⁶² Charlotte Williams, 'Claiming the National: Nation, National Identity and Ethnic Minorities', in *A Tolerant Nation?: Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Wales*, ed. by Charlotte Williams, Neil Evans, and Paul O'Leary (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 331–51 (p. 332).

⁶³ Ibid, p. 332.

⁶⁴ Emma Schofield, 'Everything Must Change: Regenerating National Identity In Post-Devolution Anglophone Welsh Writing', *Wales Art Review*, 14 August 2014 <<https://www.walesartsreview.org/the-gregynog-papers-6-everything-must-change-regenerating-national-identity-in-post-devolution-anglophone-welsh-writing/>> [accessed 14 November 2022].

⁶⁵ Darren Chetty, Elan Grug Muse, Hanan Issa, and Iestyn Tyne, eds., *Welsh (Plural): Essays on the Future of Wales* (London: Repeater Books, an imprint of Watkins Media Ltd, 2022), p. 1. *Ebsco books*.

Welshness and Welsh identity both creatively and critically. However, Welsh writers were faced with particular challenges, including 'the lack of visibility of Welsh identities and Welsh issues'⁶⁶ in Britain, especially compared to the stronger presence of Scottish and English writings. Charlotte Williams explains that 'In the early 2000s there were very few of us in Wales who might refer to ourselves as Black Welsh writers and more importantly we had no sense of ourselves as a constituent.'⁶⁷

Black and Asian Welsh writers have struggled to prove that 'Wales and Welshness belong to all those who care for her and the people who call her home,'⁶⁸ not restricted to certain ethnicities. They attempted to inscribe the nation by placing themselves within the national landscape. As Charlotte Williams explains in her 2023 essay 'On Being a Writer in Wales', 'I like to think of myself as a Welsh writer, full of the references to landscape, to the sounds and symbols of nation, the histories and heritage, the politics and the cultural nuance of place.'⁶⁹ It is only through the 'underrepresented speaking up'⁷⁰ that Welsh identity expands to include people from different diasporic backgrounds.

Welsh literature has gained more recognition and became more diverse with writers like Charlotte Williams (Welsh-Guyanese), who narrates her quest for identity between Wales and Africa in her 2002 autobiography *Sugar and Slate*; Trezza Azzopardi (Welsh-Maltese), whose debut novel *The Hiding Place* (2000) is about Maltese immigrants living in Cardiff in the 1960s and was shortlisted for many prizes including the Booker Prize in 2000; Nadifa Mohamed (Somali-British), who was awarded the Welsh Book of the Year award in 2022 for strong engagement with Welsh themes in her third novel *The Fortune Man* (2021), which tells the story of a man in Cardiff who is wrongfully accused of murder in the 1950s; and Hanan Issa (Welsh-Iraqi), the national poet of Wales since July 2022; Leonora Brito, born in Tiger Bay, Cardiff (1954) with heritage from the Cape Verde Islands, who was one of the first writers to draw attention to the Caribbean community in Wales through her short story

⁶⁶ Shaw, *BrexLit*, p. 103.

⁶⁷ Charlotte Williams, 'On Being a Writer in Wales', 19 November 2023, Available online: <<https://nation.cymru/culture/on-being-a-writer-in-wales-charlotte-williams/>> [accessed 08 January 2024].

⁶⁸ Hanan Issa, 'Have you Heard the One About the Niqabi on a Bus?', In *Welsh (Plural): Essays on the Future of Wales*, ed. by Darren Chetty, Elan Grug Muse, Hanan Issa, and Iestyn Tyne (London: Repeater Books, an imprint of Watkins Media Ltd, 2022), p. 237. *Ebsco books*

⁶⁹ Williams, 'On Being A Writer in Wales'.

⁷⁰ Issa, p. 234.

collection *Dat's Love* (1995), which dives into Cardiff's cultural history to explore issues of race in a humorous, witty way. Brito had a very short career, she died in 2007, but is described by Williams as 'the only writer [in the early 2000s] to have brought [...] mixed race experience to Wales.'⁷¹ All these writers engage with displacement and mixed-race identities by using Welsh settings and language. They address issues of belonging both at home and abroad, examine racism and cultural prejudice, and participate in the creation of a new sense of Welsh identity. They contribute to a tradition of Black Welsh writing and a larger tradition of Black British writing that writers, like Williams, have often felt excluded from because 'this part of the map was just too white'.⁷²

The way Charlotte Williams engages with Welshness in her memoir 'troubles the familiar configuration of hyphenated identities'⁷³ and provides a valuable resource for investigating Welsh identity at the turn of the century. In *Sugar and Slate*, Williams traces her own journey crossing and re-crossing the Atlantic to different destinations: Africa, Guyana, and Wales. She writes,

I was born into a long journey. I've crossed huge physical and psychological spaces to bind the great triangle of Africa and the Caribbean and Britain, and I know my journey isn't over. It is a journey of constantly grappling with the landscapes we encounter, changing them and redefining them, of corrupting the pure.⁷⁴

Williams's description of her life as a continuous, never ending journey is fascinating. These journeys are not only physical but also an elaborate, internal process through which she understands and reshapes the landscapes she encounters. It is this ongoing movement that helped her find 'a place of becoming'⁷⁵ and realise a fuller sense of her identity as a Welsh writer.

⁷¹ Charlotte Williams, 'From Llandudno to Llanrumney: Inscribing the nation', Charlotte Williams in conversation with Leonora Brito, *New Welsh Review*, 62 (2003), p. 28, [accessed 20 January 2024].

⁷² Charlotte Williams, 'I Didn't Fit in Wales, But Found My Sense of Place by Understanding Its History, and My Own', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/nov/26/didnt-fit-in-wales-but-found-sense-of-place-understanding-history>> [accessed 10 January 2024].

⁷³ Alison J. Donnell, 'Welsh and West Indian, "like nothing ... seen before": Unfolding Diasporic Lives in Charlotte Williams' *Sugar and Slate*', *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, 6. 2 (2008), 1–26 (p. 2).

⁷⁴ Williams, *Sugar and Slate*, p. 191.

⁷⁵ Williams, 'I Didn't Fit in Wales'.

In an essay entitled “‘I Going away, I Going home’: Mixed-‘Race’, Movement and Identity’, Williams explains that movement and the ‘continual processes of border crossing’ have allowed her to structure multiple ‘points of identification’,⁷⁶ and that these movements have helped her to construct a distinctive sense of self. By conceptualising movement in this manner, Williams engages in a form of travel writing, where travel is not presented as a process of arriving but rather a continuous state of searching and becoming or ‘to-ing and fro-ing, of coming and going.’⁷⁷ *Sugar and Slate* starts and ends with journeys out of and towards homelands. Williams uses maps and places located in different countries to express a changing sense of identity instigated by movement. Williams, on a flight from Trinidad to London at the end of her memoir, explains how her sense of belonging is deeply rooted in movement and a sense of in-betweenness: ‘I don’t need to look around the plane to know that the whole spectrum of the Caribbean/ Britain link will be represented; the tourist, the trader, the student [...] I feel at home.’⁷⁸

Through this conceptualization of movement, Williams constructs an identity that reflects the different cultures that form her. Going back to Rushdie’s theorization of the ‘broken mirror’ and Du Bois’s sense of ‘double consciousness’, Williams explains that she imagines her identity through the way her ‘private world mirrors disturbance and tensions in the public world and [her] inner struggles reverberate outwards like ripples on a pond.’⁷⁹ Like Rushdie and Du Bois, Williams’s conceptualization of her identity entails fragmentation and incomplete, distorted memories. Williams’s vision of her inner world as a reflection of outer disturbance suggests a multiplicity of identities that are, to a large extent, imposed by social and cultural structures. This implies the difficulty of creating a sense of identity while navigating life between different countries and dealing with racism.

In *Sugar and Slate*, Williams tells a highly personal story about family, language, history, and moving across many physical and psychological spaces through stories and memories. It is a story about belonging to Wales and ‘inscrib[ing] the nation’⁸⁰ through the

⁷⁶ Williams, ‘I Going Away’, p. 180.

⁷⁷ Williams, *Sugar and Slate*, p. 187.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 188.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 168.

⁸⁰ Williams, ‘From Llandudno to Llanrumney’, p. 28.

act of writing. Williams challenges the narrow definition of identities and insists that Wales is diverse and everyone has the right to claim a Welsh identity:

The Welsh and the English, the Welsh-speaking and the English-speaking, the proper Welsh and the not so proper Welsh, the insiders and the outsiders [...] all fighting amongst ourselves for the right to call ourselves Welsh and most of us losing out to some very particular idea about who belongs and who doesn't.⁸¹

Although Williams acknowledges the struggles against a singular Welsh identity, she pushes towards an expansion of the national imaginary to include everyone and enrich the cultural history of Wales. By discussing Nikita Lalwani in this thesis, I aim to pay more attention to Wales's rich cultural heritage and its diversity.

Similarly, in Scotland, post-devolutionary works by Black and Asian women writers have criticised narrow understandings of national identity and proposed other modes of Scottishness. Writer Suhayl Saadi notes that most of the post-2000 published works by Black and Asian Scottish writers have been 'by women.'⁸² Douglas Gifford argues in *Breaking Boundaries: From Modern to Contemporary in Scottish Fiction* (2006) that these writers have added 'new confidence' to Scottish literature, 'supplying the most successful explorations of changing Scottish identities, in a rich variety of voices and genres.'⁸³

Alex Thomson, in an article entitled 'You Can't Get There from Here: Devolution and Scottish Literary History' (2007), argues that the main objective of devolution in Scotland was to shift the focus onto Scottish national identity and to achieve a sense of 'cultural autonomy'.⁸⁴ However, according to Thomson, 'deriving "Scottish" identity from a perceived marginality in relation to mainstream British culture' has risked the exclusion of Scottish writers who do not adhere to the typical definition of Scottishness either because of 'racial

⁸¹ Williams, *Sugar and Slate*, p. 169.

⁸² Quoted in: Alastair Niven, 'New Diversity, Hybridity and Scottishness', in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume 3, Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*, ed. by Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pittock, Ksenija Horvat, and Ashley Hales (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 320–31 (p. 324).

⁸³ Douglas Gifford, 'Breaking Boundaries: From Modern to Contemporary in Scottish Fiction', in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume 3, Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*, ed. by Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pittock, Ksenija Horvat, and Ashley Hales (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 273–52 (p. 237).

⁸⁴ Alex Thomson, "'You Can't Get There from Here': Devolution and Scottish Literary History', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 3 (2007), 1–20 (p. 1).

differences' or because their connection to Britishness is less complicated.⁸⁵ One example of this is found in the poet and writer Jackie Kay, who decided to move to Manchester to raise her son because she felt that Scotland was not welcoming enough.

Many writers have attempted to navigate the complex constructions of social, cultural, and political identities in Scotland. For example, Sudanese-Scottish novelist and playwright Leila Aboulela (1964) published two popular novels in the early 2000s. *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) both deal with migrants' identities, language, and issues of national belonging, as does her short story collection, *Coloured Lights* (2001). Aboulela's position in connection to Scottish literature has been questioned continuously.⁸⁶ She was born in Sudan and spent part of her life in Scotland (between 1990 and 2000) and her first novel, *The Translator* (1999), features a Scottish setting. It was also published in Scotland. Meanwhile, writer and artist Raman Mundair, who was born in India and now lives in Scotland, published two volumes of poetry, *Lovers, Liars, Conjurors and Thieves* (2003) and *A Choreographer's Cartography* (2007), as well as the play *The Algebra of Freedom* (2007). In her writings, she constantly attempts to stretch the limits of genre and challenge the boundaries of identity and belonging. Like Aboulela, Mundair's work reshapes understanding of Scottish identity 'immersed in a foreign tongue until memories of umbilical tongue became diluted. Now I play with notions of home and projections of the self I am supposed to be, in a land where there are no true reflections of me.'⁸⁷ The way these writers stretch stereotypical definitions demonstrates that 'narratives that originate at border crossings cannot be bound by national borders, languages, and literary and critical traditions.'⁸⁸

I have examined writers and debates that re-evaluate the parameters of Britishness, Englishness, Scottishness, and Welshness in a post-devolutionary period. The turn of the millennium is a congested period in which many political, cultural, and social changes took place across the nations of Britain. In this thesis I aim to contribute to a better understanding of the 2000s as a literary period by focusing on writers who defy traditional identity expression. Writings by Black and Asian British women writers show how formulations of

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 8.

⁸⁶ See: Niven, 'New Diversity, Hybridity and Scottishness'.

⁸⁷ Quoted in: Niven, 'New Diversity', p. 326.

⁸⁸ Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 4.

Britishness, Welshness, Scottishness, and Englishness are tangible but not easy to define. They have been influenced by political discourse, as well as cultural and social changes, including devolution, the Rushdie affair in Bradford (sparked by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988), the events of 9/11 in 2001 and all that followed. Although it is not my intention to explore the current political landscape in Britain, my highly topical analysis will consider debates surrounding belonging and identity in Black British and Asian British women narratives written by those who have experienced the evolution of the cultural landscape firsthand.

The Multicultural Novel: Publishing Britain's Black and Asian Writers

As explained in the previous section, the turn of the millennium saw a notable shift towards celebrating the diversity of Britishness, sparking significant public and critical interest in what became known as the 'multicultural novel'. This interest peaked with the publication of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* in early 2000. The novel's unprecedented success reflected a growing fascination with mixed race identities and what Graham Huggan terms the 'exotic appeal' of 'publicly endorsed multicultural products'.⁸⁹ I will show here how the appeal of 'the multicultural novel' to publishers, combined with the industry's London centric focus, was one of the main factors that caused other works by Black British and Asian British writers to be overshadowed.

In *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from Its Origins to the Present Day* (2006), Patrick Parrinder explores the phenomena of the multicultural novel, or the 'novel of immigration,' which he identifies as 'the most vital form of English fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century'.⁹⁰ Parrinder's discussion mostly focuses on English fiction and English identities. He describes Britishness as a 'passport word'⁹¹ for first generation immigrants who may not fully identify as English, revealing the prejudices and sense of marginalization associated with the multicultural novel in the 2000s. Drawing on examples such as Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Parrinder illustrates how these 'novels of

⁸⁹ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 116.

⁹⁰ Patrick Parrinder, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from Its Origins to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 380. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 380.

immigration' share a 'sense of spatial confinement', with characters often 'held within a highly specific local space', most commonly within London, rarely venturing beyond.⁹² This established a strong association between what is deemed multicultural themes and a specific London setting. This sense of spatial confinement within London can also be seen in Smith's *White Teeth*. Susie Thomas, for instance, in 'Zadie Smith's False Teeth: The Marketing of Multiculturalism' (2006), argues that '*White Teeth* appeared at just the right time, when Smith's brand of undemanding multiculturalism could serve as an anthem for the complacent self-image of London as the harmonious melting pot.'⁹³

White Teeth became a marketing success even before its publication, with extensive advertising, news articles, and critical acclaim from renowned writers such as Salman Rushdie and Caryl Phillips. Zadie Smith received an advance of £250,000 and the novel, which went on to sell over a million copies, was heralded as a quintessential representation of 'real Britain'. Smith's editor, Simon Prosser, described her 'as an incredibly British writer—and the Britishness that she embodies, both as a writer and as a person, is a very real form of Britishness.'⁹⁴ Prosser implies that the fact that Smith is young, mixed race, and grew up in London makes her an embodiment of multicultural Britain. The portrayal of Smith as a 'real form of Britishness' sets a somewhat unfair standard against which every other mixed-race writer would be measured. It was not only the novel itself, but also Smith's persona, which was positioned as emblematic of an 'entrepreneurial, multicultural Britain.'⁹⁵ This 'entrepreneurial' Britain seems to align with the calls for a redefined British identity that was instigated by the 'New Labour' party in the late 90s and early 2000s and that was branded by the rather comic slogan 'cool Britannia'. Subsequent mixed-race writers found themselves constantly measured against Smith's multiculturalism. They were often introduced as 'the

⁹² Ibid, p. 384.

⁹³ Susie Thomas, 'Zadie Smith's False Teeth: The Marketing of Multiculturalism', *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 4.1 (March 2006) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2006/thomas.html>> [accessed 13 February 24].

⁹⁴ Cited in: Thomas, 'Zadie Smith's False Teeth'.

⁹⁵ John Crace, Review of *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, *The Guardian*, 26 January 2000 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jan/26/fiction.zadiesmith>> [accessed 13 February 24].

new Zadie Smith', as in the case of Diana Evans upon the publication of her first novel *26a* (2005),⁹⁶ also set in London, and Monica Ali with her debut novel *Brick Lane*.⁹⁷

Many critics responded positively to the publication of *White Teeth*. In a chapter titled 'New Ethnicities, The Novel, and the Burden of Representation' (2006), James Procter discusses the publishing landscape and literary marketplace at the turn of the millennium and registers a 'broader fascination'⁹⁸ in mixed race identities in Britain, citing the success of Smith's, Ali's, and Levy's novels as evidence that 'their mainstream popularity [was] undeniably bound up with issues of race and ethnicity.'⁹⁹ Procter continues to describe how the celebration of these novels stems from their 'embrace of diversity and difference in multicultural Britain' and the way they 'capture the new spirit of Britain at the millennium threshold.'¹⁰⁰ In a chapter titled 'Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism for the Millennium' (2003), Dominic Head argues that *White Teeth*, 'through its complex plot, its diverse range of characters, its broad post-war historical sweep, and its insistent and summative portrayal of a de facto hybrid life, is artfully constructed as a definitive representation of twentieth-century British multiculturalism.'¹⁰¹

Similarly, Claire Squires, in *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007), argues that one reason for the success of Smith's *White Teeth* was her publisher's creation of a 'marketable author' who was depicted as a clear representation of 'a new multicultural Britain'.¹⁰² For Squires, Smith's *White Teeth*, along with Ali's *Brick Lane* and Levy's *Small Island*, 'speak of Britain, of who we are as a nation'.¹⁰³ Therefore, depicting a sense of unity within Britain that centres around London and Englishness and

⁹⁶ See: Emine Saner, 'Don't call me the new Zadie', *The Standard*, 12 April 2012 <<https://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/don-t-call-me-the-new-zadie-7274402.html>> [accessed 24 January 2024].

⁹⁷ See: Procter, 'New Ethnicities'.

⁹⁸ Procter, 'New Ethnicities', p. 111.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 111.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 113.

¹⁰¹ Dominic Head, 'Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism for the Millennium', in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham, and Philip Tew (Oxford: Polity, 2003), pp. 106–19 (p. 106).

¹⁰² Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 178–79.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 181.

does not pay enough attention to other forms of cultural diversity especially in relation to the devolved nations.

The extensive hype surrounding these novels and their elevation into cultural icons has created a rather narrow definition of mixed-race identities and multicultural Britishness. Consequently, other Black British and Asian British writers who explore identities beyond England or locations other than London have been marginalized. Scottish and Welsh writers were among the most affected by the critical and publishing interest in the metropolitan multicultural novel. During the 2000s, publishers became less interested in narratives with specific national contexts. Richard Todd, in *Consuming Fiction: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today*, claims that Scottish and Welsh writers often feel forced to sacrifice their 'national roots' to appeal 'to the London publishers' and receive sufficient 'marketing to reach a potentially global audience.'¹⁰⁴ This dynamic sheds light on why authors who strongly celebrate their 'national roots', like Charlotte Williams and, to a lesser extent, Jackie Kay, struggle to gain traction with major publishing houses, remaining largely confined to recognition within Scotland and Wales.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, the pressures imposed by prevailing market forces and expectations might explain why Nikita Lalwani, in *Gifted*, was hesitant in engaging with Welsh themes and Welshness.

A distinction has emerged between what Corinne Fowler describes as 'sexy' multicultural writing and more nationally specific 'black' narratives.¹⁰⁶ This categorization designates certain works as 'other' because they do not align with prevailing multicultural criteria, with even 'accented literature', or literature written in regional dialects, failing to attract publishers' interest.¹⁰⁷ For instance, Xiaolu Guo's novel, *A Concise Chinese- English Dictionary For Lovers*, was criticised by Jonathan Mirsky in the *Spectator* for not being written in what was perceived as 'grown up English',¹⁰⁸ a judgement that also colours Carole Cadwalladr's *Guardian* review, which begins with the statement 'I not Chinese. I British. I

¹⁰⁴ Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 132.

¹⁰⁵ Jackie Kay publishes her books with Picador a literary imprint at Pan Macmillan, established in the UK in 1970s to provide a platform 'for voices that are often not heard'.

¹⁰⁶ Fowler, p. 81.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Mirsky, 'Cute Pidgin Pie', *The Spectator*, 15 February 2007 <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/spectator/thisweek/28010/cute-pidgin-pie.shtml>> [accessed 24 January 2024].

prefer read book with sentences not made look like broke.’¹⁰⁹ These rather problematic reviews illustrate the narrow lens through which works by Asian and Black British writers were judged.

Sarah Brouillette and John R. Coleman, in a chapter titled ‘Prizing Otherness: Black and Asian British Writing in the Global Marketplace’, argue that the emphasis on ‘otherness’ has become a ‘characteristic of the literary field’.¹¹⁰ They critique the tendency to market writers based on their own identity and cultural background, arguing that such strategies place a burden of representation on Black and Asian British writers.¹¹¹ The concept of ‘burden of representation’ was originally coined by Kobena Mercer in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994).¹¹² Mercer argues that because minority artists and writers are not represented enough, they are often expected to carry the burden of representing their entire culture. Therefore, the demand for a particular version of multiculturalism has placed a lot of pressure on ethnic minority writers and caused publishing houses to lose interest in many Black and Asian British writers.

Black and Asian British writers have often expressed anxieties about publishing and the literary marketplace in Britain. Charlotte Williams, for instance, has consistently expressed how ‘Writers of colour are still as yet grossly underrepresented in UK publishing as a whole.’¹¹³ Williams’ own career as a writer serves as a case in point, illustrating how the industry tends to favour writers who engage with multicultural themes in relation to London. Williams published her memoir *Sugar and Slate* in 2002, but she felt her identity as a Black Welsh writer was not fully recognized until 2022 when her work was included in the Library of Wales series.¹¹⁴ The series, launched in 2006, sponsored by the Welsh government, has republished more than 50 Welsh works of literature in English in an attempt to ‘open up the borders that have denied some of [Wales’s] best writers a presence.’¹¹⁵ The belated inclusion

¹⁰⁹ Carole Cadwalladr, ‘Heathlow Airport? Oh how we laughed’, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/feb/11/fiction.features2>> [accessed 24 January 2024].

¹¹⁰ Sarah Brouillette, and John R. Coleman, ‘Prizing Otherness: Black and Asian British Writing in the Global Marketplace’, in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*, ed. by Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 579–93 (p. 584).

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp. 584–7.

¹¹² Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹¹³ Williams, ‘On Being a Writer in Wales’.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Available online at: < <https://thelibraryofwales.com/contact> > [accessed 20 February 2024].

of Williams suggests a critical negligence within Wales and shows how underrepresented Black and Asian Welsh writers are. It was not until 2023 that *Sugar and Slate* gained further acclaim when it was republished alongside twelve other Black British titles in the Penguin series *Black Britain: Writing Back Complete Collection*, curated by Bernardine Evaristo. This delayed recognition underscores the challenges faced by writers whose narratives diverge from mainstream expectations, particularly those outside the dominant London-centric focus of the industry.

In a 2023 article entitled 'On Being a Writer In Wales', Charlotte Williams reflects on the early stages of her writing career, noting that 'the idea of a black literature beyond the metropolis had barely registered within an established Black British canon that spoke largely to the metropolitan experience.'¹¹⁶ She explains that it was only through the work of Jackie Kay that 'the reach and scope of a black experience that referenced a literature of the sub-national and regional hyphenated grid: Black-Scottish, Black-Welsh, Black-Irish culminating in a much referenced poetry collection *Out of Bounds*.'¹¹⁷ For Williams, the recognition of a specifically Black Welsh tradition was only possible through shifting connections with Scotland and Ireland. By extension, writing from all four nations helped transform what it means to be British. Williams insists that 'the Black British listing would have to stretch its multicultural imaginary to accommodate this decentering trajectory and give [Black British writers] presence.'¹¹⁸ Williams calls for a more inclusive understanding of multicultural Britain that includes writers from all the British nations. It is only through stretching this 'multicultural imaginary' that the Black British literary tradition can reflect the many diverse experiences and identities within it.

After 2016, writers began to speak more openly about the injustices in the publishing industry and some publishing houses, like Penguin Random House, began internal changes to become more diverse. In an article in the *Guardian* 'Diversity in publishing is under attack' (2018) writer Hanif Kureishi expressed that he has often felt frustrated by the publishing industry in Britain. In the article, Kureishi praises Penguin Random House's decision to

¹¹⁶ Williams, 'On Being a Writer in Wales'.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

‘reflect the diversity of British society’¹¹⁹ and explains that the current state of publishing in Britain often forces him to feel ‘undeserving of being heard’ and that the ‘real talent has been neglected and discouraged by those who dominate the culture’.¹²⁰ In 2017 the Jhalak prize was launched to recognize BAME writers. However, the lack of an appropriate number of submissions has caused writer Nikesh Shukla, the Prize chair, to express frustration because for a long time ‘the attention of industry was too focused on a small number of high-profile writers.’¹²¹ In 2023, writer Bernardine Evaristo responded to the publishing industry’s ‘reluctance’ to publish the work of Black British and Asian British writers¹²² by curating the aforementioned Penguin’s *Black Britain: Writing Back Complete Collection* ‘to correct historic bias in British publishing and bring a wealth of lost writing back into circulation.’¹²³

Injustices in the publishing industry were further clarified in the 2015 Writing the Future report, commissioned by Spread the Word, a writer development agency. It revealed that Black and Asian British writers have much greater prospects of publication if they write ‘literary fiction that conforms to a stereotypical view of Black or Asian communities,’¹²⁴ rather than writing about dislocation and struggles to belong. This trend underscores the industry’s tendency to utilize the multicultural novel as a kind of ‘nation-branding’, bringing in minority authors to create an image of Britain as a set ‘of happily multicultural communities.’¹²⁵ The way that ‘the multicultural novel appeals to a specifically Anglophone market and is highly attractive to publishers,’¹²⁶ has led to a focus on multicultural novels set

¹¹⁹ Hanif Kureishi, ‘Diversity in publishing is under attack. I hear the sound of knuckles dragging’, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2018 < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/15/diversity-publishing-culture-minority-writers-penguin> > [accessed 10 February 2024].

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Nikesh Shukla, ‘Chair of BAME Prize Slams UK Publishers After Lack of Submissions’, in Sian Cain, *The Guardian*, 19 November 2016 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/19/bame-prize-slams-uk-publishers-sunny-singh-jhalak-diversity-britain> > [accessed 10 February 2024].

¹²² Cited in: Dalya Alberge, ‘Booker Winner’s Mission to Put UK’s Forgotten Black Writers Back in Print’, *The Guardian*, 9 January 2021 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jan/09/booker-winners-mission-to-put-uks-forgotten-black-writers-back-in-print> > [accessed 13 February 2024].

¹²³ Cited Online in: < <https://shop.penguin.co.uk/products/black-britain-writing-back-complete-collection> > [accessed 12 March 2024].

¹²⁴ Danuta Kean and Mel Larsen, eds., *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place* (London: Spread the Word, 2015), Available at: < <https://Spreadtheword.org.uk/writing-the-future/> > p. 2 [accessed 20 January 2024].

¹²⁵ Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 4. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹²⁶ Shaw, ‘The Cosmopolitan Value of the Multicultural Novel’, p. 51.

mainly in London, thereby marginalizing many Black and Asian British authors whose work does not fit the criteria. Writers dealing with themes beyond stereotypical 'black themes' or employing non-standard forms of English often find themselves overlooked within the industry.

Taking all these critical arguments and debates into consideration, this thesis will reexamine the 2000s. Providing a counterpoint to the celebration of writers like Smith, Ali, and Levy, I will investigate how Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's exploration of identity and belonging offers a new lens through which to consider Black British and Asian British writers in the post-devolutionary period.

Breakdown of Thesis Chapters

In keeping with my previously stated intent to contribute to the rich body of research by scholars such as Macdonald, Fowler, and Procter, who advocate for greater attention to Black and Asian British writings, I have chosen to divide this thesis into three chapters, focusing on the works of Nikita Lalwani, Jackie Kay, and Xiaolu Guo. My hypothesis is that Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's engagement with complex forms of identity and their use of imagery, language, and narrative format warrants deeper analysis. Including their works in the current body of research provides new perspectives on multiculturalism and the struggle to belong in Britain during the 2000s.

In the first two chapters of this thesis, I place much-needed attention on Welshness and Scottishness, aiming to deconstruct the synonymy between Britishness and Englishness in the post-devolutionary period. In the third chapter, I investigate an example of Chinese-British fiction, addressing an ethnic minority which rarely appears in discussions of Britishness and Englishness. I argue that the writers selected for this thesis do not mirror celebrated writers of the 2000s, such as Zadie Smith, and therefore did not receive much hype or promotional publicity. In this thesis, I explore how Lalwani, Kay, Guo, and their protagonists cross physical and cultural borders, which force them to question their belonging and reconstruct a sense of identity in relation to one of the British nations. Each chapter focuses on the national limits and transnational connections of Welsh, Scottish, and

English identities, and the degree of their dependence on or independence from Britishness. Through examining the works of Lalwani, Kay, and Guo, this thesis provides an extended analysis of identity and belonging, and debates about Britishness, Englishness, Welshness, and Scottishness in the 2000s.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on Wales and Welsh identities through an analysis of Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted* (2007), a Bildungsroman about a Welsh-Indian mathematics genius called Rumi. In this chapter, I explore Lalwani's engagement with debates about immigrants' identities in the 2000s, through an exploration of home, education, and space. In *Gifted*, Cardiff is central to Rumi's self-realization and her growing agency as she navigates her mixed-race identity. However, Lalwani's limited engagement with Wales and Welshness, is read as a consequence of the pressures exerted on Black and Asian British women writers by the literary market in the 2000s. Black and Asian British writers have highlighted the necessity of addressing the challenges faced by Black and Asian women writers. For instance, author Roopa Farooki explains that:

All artists fight for the right to practice their craft, and we, as Asian writers, fight more than most. We fight for our places on publisher's lists, for our places on the prize lists, for our places in the promotions. We writers, both men and women, may be dismissed because of our appearance, because of the boxes we have been put in, the brands that publishers have built. Accused of being too political, or not political enough. Too Asian, or not enough.¹²⁷

By focusing on Lalwani and Welshness, this chapter makes the case for fighting such injustices and acknowledging the diverse range of perspectives Black and Asian British women writers have to offer. By exploring the novel's setting in Cardiff, I will show how the novel engages with space and mobility in a way that deepens our understanding of identity and belonging. I contend that through locating her novel beyond London, in the rather overlooked Cardiff, Lalwani 'maps new territories' for Black British and Asian British women writers,¹²⁸ and offers a new lens on multicultural Britishness. Rumi's, the novel's protagonist, unresolved identity struggle shows a fragmented Britain rather than the ease of assimilation

¹²⁷ Roopa Farooki, 'Keynote: The Asian Writer Festival', 24 October 2017, Available at <<https://theasianwriter.co.uk/2017/10/24/roopa-farooki-keynote-the-asian-writer-festival/>> [accessed 27 July 2024].

¹²⁸ Ole Birk Laursen, 'Writing Lives, Inventing Selves: Black and Asian Women's Life-Writing', in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing*, ed. by Susheila Nasta and Mark U. Stein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 499–520 (p. 519).

depicted in other celebrated novels in the 2000s, like Smith's and Ali's. Her journey to self-discovery is complicated by her relationships with her parents and extended family in India, as well as her cultural struggle within the British educational system and her label as gifted. However, Rumi's movement, either exploring Cardiff and Oxford or her journeys to visit her extended family in India, gives her an element of freedom that enables her to renegotiate her identity and sense of belonging. The chapter concludes with a Brexit Postscript that highlights the cultural anxieties depicted in Lalwani's novel *You People* and reflects on its critical significance.

Chapter two turns to Scotland by examining Jackie Kay's memoir *Red Dust Road* (2010) and her short story collection *Wish I Was Here* (2006). I start the chapter by locating Kay within the wider frame of post-devolutionary Scottish writing. Kay has often fought to be acknowledged as a Scottish writer and for her voice to be heard. However, Kay's Blackness seems to overshadow her Scottishness when it comes to critical engagement with her work. For instance, Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder, and Ruth Robbins in *The British Short Story* (2011), discuss Kay alongside Kureshi as a multicultural Black British writer rather than with James Kelman, Ali Smith, and A. L. Kennedy as 'a Scottish writer'.¹²⁹ In this chapter, I explore Kay's challenge to dominant cultural prejudices and her depiction of identity struggle stemming from her sense of displacement and awareness of being different in Scotland. Through her work, Kay poses an important question about who belongs to Scotland. This chapter is an investigation of the contested national context in *Red Dust Road* and *Wish I Was Here*. The first part of the chapter deals with Kay's representation of the challenges of formulating Black Scottish identity in the midst of and against racism and social prejudice, while the second part concentrates on adoption and traces her journey to find her birth parents. The final part of the chapter discusses Kay's short story collection *Wish I Was Here*, focusing on mirror imageries and identity structure. In this chapter, I aim to provide a new critical perspective by highlighting the similarities between Kay's memoir and her short story collection, interpreting the two works as mutually complicating each other. The chapter ends with a Brexit Postscript that underscores the cultural tensions explored in Kay's poetry

¹²⁹ Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder, and Ruth Robbins, eds., *The British Short Story* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 246–65.

collection *Bantam* and considers its critical relevance in the contemporary sociopolitical landscape.

Chapter three offers an exploration of Englishness by considering a novel that is set in London, Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). In this chapter Asian and Black English identity 'becomes a devolutionary identity as conceptually nascent as Black Scottish or Welsh'.¹³⁰ The chapter's investigation of Guo, highlights British-Chinese writers' perspectives and struggle with recognition that seems to be overshadowed by critical concentration on South Asian and Afro-Caribbean perspectives in Britain in the 2000s. The main argument revolves around Guo's unconventional representation of London as a crossroads of transnational movement between Europe and Wales. The novel shifts common understanding of Britishness and Englishness, and presents a sense of fragmented Britain through its depiction of borderless Europe and Wales. By engaging with Europe and Wales, Guo moves away from a focus on London as a sanctuary and an engagement with the legacy of empire depicted in other popular works published in the 2000s. The chapter investigates how Guo uses language creatively to voice her protagonist's identity struggle. She mixes Chinese and English and interrupts the text with unconventional spelling of English words to show the instability of language and its effect on identity and belonging. I read the novel as a modern take on the Pygmalion myth, in which Z, the novel's protagonist, becomes a dynamic writer and artist in her own right, while her English lover is portrayed as a decaying sculptor with diminishing agency. This is complicated by ambiguous and incomplete images of the body that turns the novel into a congested space where identity and belonging struggle remain unresolved. The chapter concludes with a Brexit Postscript that examines the cultural dislocation portrayed in Guo's *A Lover's Discourse* and reflects on its profound resonance in a post-referendum Britain.

I have chosen to discuss Lalwani, Kay, and Guo side by side to shed more light on the injustices and internal divisions that dominated the literary marketplace in Britain in the 2000s. These writers' struggles with labelling, prejudice, racism, and lack of representation have resulted in a limited critical attention. In an article published in 2010, Graeme Macdonald poses a very important question about the consequences of devolution and

¹³⁰ Graeme Macdonald, 'Scottish Extractions: "Race" and Racism in Devolutionary Fiction', *Orbis Litterarum*, 65.2 (2010), 79–107, (p. 83).

whether the political changes that led to the 'break up of Britain' imply the 'break up of Black Britain?'¹³¹ This question significantly influences my discussion on how my selected writers interact with Britishness in the 2000s. Macdonald also adds that ethnic minorities writers from the devolved nations (Scotland and Wales) 'had little importance or impact' compared to writers from England.¹³² In this thesis, I investigate how far devolved (Black and Asian English, Welsh, and Scottish) writings operate independently and how they fit in the larger umbrella of Britishness. I also explore how the increased scrutiny of a coherent British identity is represented in the writings of Black and Asian women authors in the devolved nations.

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 83.

¹³² Ibid, p. 83.

Chapter One

Finding and Losing Oneself in the Process: Transnational Identities and Shifting Boundaries in Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted*

Introduction

This chapter will explore contemporary debates about immigrants' identity struggle in Britain, and more specifically in Wales, in the 2000s by focusing on the representation of home, education, and space in Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted* (2007).¹ Lalwani's novel is usually read as a Bildungsroman that follows the life of a Welsh-Indian girl called Rumi, who is gifted in mathematics. In this chapter, I will extend such interpretations by analysing different settings in the novel and exploring them as spaces of identity negotiation. These settings include the family home in Cardiff, Rumi's relatives' houses in India, the library, Oxford University, and urban space in Cardiff. The reason for this focus on spatial dynamics is to explore the 'multi-layered interaction with different emotional, cultural, and ideological changes'² that take place in each of these settings as Rumi reconstructs her sense of self and renegotiates her connection to multiple homes. These interactions are associated with images of windows, material culture, and food consumption in a way that recalls Salman Rushdie's conceptualization of the 'broken mirror' that reflects multiple distorted reflections and through which the 'mundane acquired numinous qualities.'³ Rushdie's theorisation relates to immigrants' struggle to create a sense of identity while being alienated from mainstream culture.

Much of the scholarship about literary representations of immigration in Britain in the 2000s has focused on certain popular novels, like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*,⁴ Andrea Levy's *Small Island*,⁵ and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*,⁶ that portray multicultural experiences in London and the apparent ease of assimilation into Britain. In this chapter, I add to the

¹ Nikita Lalwani, *Gifted* (London: Viking, 2007).

² Diane L. Wolf, 'Family Secrets: Transnational Struggles Among Children of Filipino Immigrants', *Sociological Perspectives*, 40.3 (1997), 457–482 (p. 459).

³ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta in Association with Penguin, 1991), p.11.

⁴ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000).

⁵ Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Tinder Press, 2015).

⁶ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004).

existing critical discussion by shifting the focus to ideas of Britishness and Welshness through an emphasis on space and mobility between different spaces in Lalwani's *Gifted*. I will argue that mobility between these spaces, whether physical or emotional, gives Rumi, the novel's protagonist, much-needed freedom to recreate her identity and renegotiate her relationship with her family. My analysis will build on Stella Bolaki's argument that 'mobility has always served as a metaphor for freedom and self-possession.'⁷

Gifted offers a fresh perspective on immigrants' identities in Britain in the 2000s because of its setting in Wales, its engagement with alternative versions of British multiculturalism, and its attentiveness to the complexity of Rumi's formulation of her identity as she navigates geographical spaces, language, and the British educational system. Rumi's unresolved identity struggle emphasizes the novel's searching quality and illustrates how Lalwani defies the 'unconditional optimism'⁸ about assimilation and belonging to Britain that seems to prevail in the writings of Black and Asian British women writers in the 2000s. Furthermore, *Gifted* setting in Cardiff provides an important sphere of cultural and transnational interactions that enables Rumi to create a new sense of self and alter her connection to home.

This chapter will discuss Lalwani's exploration of space, movement, language, and the struggle created by the label 'gifted' (Rumi is discovered to be a mathematics genius at the age of five and immediately finds herself caught in her parents' ambition to make her the youngest student to attend Oxford University). All these issues affect Rumi's journey of self-discovery and identity formation. The argument will particularly focus on cultural contexts, settings, transnational experience, and gender roles in South Asian cultures. It will present a close reading of the novel to complicate understandings of the 2000s that have been shaped by extensive popular and critical attention on writers like Smith and Ali, who were seen as prime examples of multiculturalism at the turn of the millennium.⁹ The discussion will focus on education and the complications related to cultural conflicts and

⁷ Stella Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), p. 44. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

⁸ Chris Weedon, 'Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women's Writing', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 2.1 (2008), 17–35 (p. 17).

⁹ See: Dominic Head, 'Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism for the Millennium', in *Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Richard J. Lane, Rod Mengham and Philip Tew (Oxford: Polity, 2003), pp. 106–19.

movement between different spaces, Rumi's school, Cardiff's library, and Oxford University. Discussions of ethnicity and immigration inevitably include the topics of gender and culture. As Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis argue, ethnic groups cannot be considered without attending to 'other modes of differentiation such as class or gender'.¹⁰ Taking these various modes of differentiation into consideration, I will argue that the characters' differing expectations of what life is like between two cultures causes frustration and results in unsettled family relations. In *Gifted*, each member of the Vasi family, Rumi, her parents, and her little brother Nibu, undertakes a journey to reconstruct his or her identity in a way that aligns with their interpretation of reality. These different interpretations cause the family to exist in a constant state of struggle.

In this introduction, I will start with an overview of the novel and a discussion of the complications Lalwani's own position as a writer adds to the analysis, then I will move to an overview of the argument in each section of this chapter. Finally, I will draw attention to how the novel departs from other, better-known novels by contemporary British Asian authors.

Gifted (2007) is Nikita Lalwani's first novel. Lalwani, a British Asian writer, was born in Kota, India and raised in Cardiff, Wales. Life as a 1.5 generation (this term is often used to refer to British writers who immigrated to Britain before they reached adulthood who usually have undeveloped ideas about their countries of origin)¹¹ immigrant has been a substantial struggle for Lalwani, who says in a 2007 article for *The Observer*, 'I wonder how to label myself and my brother in this list of nationalities – Indian origin, childhood in Wales, Sindhi parents displaced through the partition of India from a state in what is now Pakistan. There is a crucial difference between us.'¹² Lalwani's use of the word 'us' shows how different cultures, heritage, and senses of belonging can exist within the same family. In *Gifted*, Lalwani explores a similar sense of dislocation and a struggle with identity formation through the character of Rumica Vasi (Rumi), the novel's protagonist, who is also of Indian

¹⁰ Floya Anthias, Jo. Campling, and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds., *Woman-Nation-State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 2.

¹¹ See for example: Ruth Maxey's book *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 83.

¹² Nikita Lalwani, 'Escape: Postcard From India: My Family and Other Places', *The Guardian*, 25 November 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2007/nov/25/escape.india>> [accessed 20 May 2021].

heritage but is born and raised in Cardiff. In Rumi's character, Lalwani shows us how a person can juggle different cultural heritages at the same time, and how feelings of estrangement and belonging can intertwine to create a sense of home. In an interview at UCL, Lalwani describes *Gifted* as '41 percent autobiographical',¹³ as it contains glimpses of her own experience growing up between two cultures.

The novel explores diverse themes related to belonging, ethnic identities, assimilation, and cultural tension, especially those related to British and Indian cultural identities. This chapter will analyse these themes by providing a close reading of the novel that focuses on Lalwani's depiction of immigrant identities in relation to space, language, food, and education. The novel is mainly set in Cardiff in the 1980s, but its events occur in different locations both in India and Britain, which is another major focus of the chapter. *Gifted* explores the idea of cultural belonging in Britain, and it taps into the discussion about the separateness of cultures and the pressure placed on immigrants to belong to one culture or another. In this chapter I will relate the novel to the ongoing debate about cultural diversity in Britain and the ambivalent status of immigrants as 'insiders' or 'outsiders'.

The analysis, in this chapter, comprises three interrelated sections, which focus on home, education, and space. The first section will trace the tensions that build up between Rumi and her parents, which leads to a complicated relationship with both home and nation. The analysis revolves around second-generation immigrants and their struggle to construct an identity between different cultural and linguistic roots. In this section, I will show how Lalwani challenges fixed ideas about home and belonging; she presents the interaction between social and cultural expectations and the role they play in identity structure. This section will also discuss the representation of British Asian female characters and some South Asian social practices, including food, language, and gender roles.

In the second section of the chapter, I will analyse the way in which Lalwani represents the themes of education and cultural struggle. In this section, the battle for individuality and the fight to break from the ethnic constraints of home depicted in the first

¹³ 'Q&A: Nikita Lalwani, UCL writer-in-residence', *UCL News*, 20 June 2008
<<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2008/jun/qa-nikita-lalwani-ucl-writer-residence>> [accessed 26 May 2021].

part will be developed through a focus on mathematics and literature and how these subjects connect the novel to colonial and post-colonial history. The section will examine how Rumi's label as 'gifted' creates more cultural and identity struggles and adds tension to her relationship with her parents. The discussion in this section, much like in the other two sections, will focus on space and mobility. I will argue that Rumi's cultural mobility, between her school, Cardiff library, and Oxford University, creates much needed freedom to facilitate her identity development.

The last section of the chapter will explore the representation of space and Cardiff. The debate about immigrant writers and their role in shaping ideas about cultural identity in Britain is very diverse and goes back to the eighteenth century, as argued by Prahbu Gupta.¹⁴ However, my focus here will mainly be British Asian writers and mostly no earlier than the 1980s. The specifics of such labels, including postcolonial writers, British Asian writers, or South Asian writers, must be taken into account when considering the text. In Lalwani's case the label British Asian can be 'particularised'¹⁵ into Welsh-Indian. This section will pay special attention to space and national belonging from different perspectives: Britishness, Welshness, and Indianness. The main argument concerns the fluidity of cultural identity and how the multicultural city space of Cardiff facilitates the creation of a more hybrid, transnational ethnic identity for Rumi. The section will also briefly address the use of material culture in the novel. I will interpret the novel as a Bildungsroman and compare it with two best-selling coming-of-age narratives by British Asian women writers. I will conclude with a comparison between Lalwani's representation of Cardiff and Ali's portrayal of London in *Brick Lane* to show how Lalwani's focus on Wales offers a fresh perspective on immigrants' identities in Britain in the 2000s that moves away from the focus on a homogenous national identity.

In order to demonstrate what is distinctive about Lalwani's *Gifted* and how the novel participates in a larger tradition of immigrant writing, I will situate the novel in relation to other famous late twentieth-century texts by immigrant writers from the Indian

¹⁴ Prahbu Gupta, *Black British Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Dangaroo Press, 1986), p. 17.

¹⁵ Robert Lee, *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction* (London: Pluto, 1995), p. 2.

subcontinent. Such comparison enables us to see what is new about the novel and how far it fits into broader literary trends.

It is notable that, much like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*,¹⁶ Lalwani's *Gifted* depicts a fragmented Indian subcontinent, torn by geographical, religious, and gender differences. *Midnight's Children* is an iconic postcolonial text that is seen to embody a major shift towards an academic and public interest in immigrant writing, especially from the Indian subcontinent. As Bill Ashcroft argues, in the 1980s 'post-colonial studies took the academic world by storm', as the success of writers, like Rushdie, who were born 'elsewhere' brought to the surface arguments about belonging and Britishness.¹⁷ In subsequent decades, Rushdie's writing influenced many immigrant writers including Lalwani. In one of her articles in *The Guardian*, Lalwani describes the effect of Rushdie's writings as 'life changing' for her.¹⁸ She explains that his use of language, and the 'audacity' and boldness of his cultural references gave her both 'agony' and ecstasy'.¹⁹ Although the two novels have different narrative frameworks, both present stories of gifted children who parallel India's cultural heritage and the struggle these children face as they carry the burden of being gifted. In some parts of *Gifted*, Lalwani appears to criticise the realities British Asian children face with her repeated references to the historical struggles between Hindus and Muslims and how these struggles continue to affect the lives of young British Indians such as Rumi, who is punished and accused of desecrating her family's honour for having a relationship with a Muslim boy.

Gifted does not merely focus on hybridity, assimilation, and cultural struggle but also dives deeply into personal and familial struggles associated with the everyday concerns of a young girl trying to find her identity while living in 1980s Cardiff. Rumi attempts to create her own identity, but she finds herself in a constant struggle with her family. Her father, Mahesh, a maths professor, came to Britain in search of some kind of recognition and to prove that he can get into 'all the bloody jewels they treasured so exclusively in this country:

¹⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Cape, 1981).

¹⁷ Bill Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of a Colonial Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001), p.1.

¹⁸ Nikita Lalwani, 'The Day I Fell in Love with Salman Rushdie', *The Guardian*, 27 June 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/jun/27/thedayifellinlovewithsa>> [accessed 14 March 2021].

¹⁹ Ibid.

that he had been offered a place at their Cambridge and their UCL'' (p. 8). Her mother, Shreene, on the other hand, feels forced to live in Britain, as she states at the beginning of the novel, 'I am Indian, my heart is desi' (p. 12). Rumi's younger brother, Nibu, adds to the complexity of Lalwani's exploration of gender in connection to South Asian cultures, as the existence of the male brother allows for a much deeper focus on the representation of Rumi and her mother. Throughout the novel, Rumi finds herself caught between two forces: her father, who wants her to excel and prove that she can be British and Indian at the same time, and her mother's rejection of everything that is not Indian. Thus, Rumi's formulation of her own identity and her sense of belonging is overshadowed by familial struggle.

Gifted is divided into three main parts, each marking a shift in Rumi's struggle to create a life of her own in a place where she finally feels she belongs. The first part begins when Rumi is five years old when her teachers discover she is gifted in maths (the cultural struggle over how to interpret Rumi's gift/hard work will be discussed later in the chapter). It gives insight into Rumi's childhood and how her 'gift' redefines her relationship with her parents. At first, Rumi embraces her gift and feels special because her parents are fully focused on her, paying more attention to her, but as Rumi grows up, she starts to feel the pressure of being gifted, which further complicates her life and ends up being extremely overwhelming. After her first trip to India, Rumi develops a fascination with her Indian heritage.

The second part starts with Rumi's addiction to eating cumin seeds, which in a sense indicates her growing sense of exclusion and her deep desire to identify with something. In this part, Rumi is an adolescent, determined to finally free herself from her parents' control by passing her exams and attending Oxford University. The final part of the novel begins with fifteen-year-old Rumi on her way to Oxford to begin her studies. Her life at Oxford proves more difficult and challenging than she anticipated. She continues to struggle as she tries to separate her life into two different identities: her Cardiff self and her Oxford self. However, her plans fail when her parents discover her relationship with Fareed, a Muslim boy she meets at Oxford. Rumi decides to break free from her family and her studies and live her own life in Brighton.

Although Lalwani's *Gifted* narrates Rumi's journey from childhood to adulthood, the novel departs from the conventions of the coming-of-age narrative. Rumi's story of self-discovery and rebellion against familial constraints is not resolved at the end and does not come to a happy nor clear conclusion. At the beginning of the novel, Lalwani plays on the structure of a Bildungsroman, presenting Rumi's struggle to achieve her selfhood while living between two cultures, British and Indian, but at the end, Rumi and her family are left to face unfulfilled dreams of assimilation and multiculturalism. Lalwani's use of the Bildungsroman form to engage with themes of identity formation and cultural integration will be discussed in more details later in the chapter.

Overall, this chapter will discuss how Lalwani's novel complicates ideas about home, education, and space. The chapter will try to address certain gaps in existing scholarly work in the 2000s by focusing on Wales and turning away from much discussed places like London. Also, other themes, such as language, religion, food, and first- and second-generation struggles will be discussed, providing valuable insight into immigrants' struggles to belong in Britain as they negotiate their identities between different cultures. Language will be investigated through what Rachael Gilmour describes as 'linguistic displacement'.²⁰ In the novel, language connects to national belonging and transnational experience, and my discussion will therefore include an exploration of the significance of English, Welsh, and Hindi.

In addition, the discussion around first- and second-generation tensions will draw upon Diane L. Wolf's theorisation of 'emotional transnationalism', or the sense of in-betweenness second-generation immigrants experience, 'which situates them between different generational and locational points of reference – their parents [...] and their own – both the real and the imagined'.²¹ Pramod K. Nayar, meanwhile, describes the 'fractured condition' between first-generation immigrants who are 'culturally rooted in a home country'²² and second-generation immigrants who consider the 'host country' to be their home. Such cultural rootedness causes parents to expect their children to adhere to the same values they hold, and they thus impose religion on their children and restrict their

²⁰ Rachael Gilmour, *Bad English: Literature, Multilingualism, and the Politics of Language in Contemporary Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 2–4.

²¹ Wolf, 'Family Secrets', p. 457.

²² Pramod K. Nayar, *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 149.

children's mobility. I will analyse Rumi's interaction with her parents and their cultural beliefs in this respect.

Moving In and Out of 'Home'

This section draws on various themes such as language, food, and the depiction of women in South Asian cultures in order to explore Lalwani's representation of home in *Gifted*. Images of 'home' are central to the novel, which begins and ends with journeys towards and away from home. When we first meet Rumi, the novel's protagonist, she is walking back home from school with her teacher at the age of five. The portrayal of walking towards home is a starting point for her identity and familial struggle. Mrs Gold, the teacher, describes the walk home as 'lovely', while Rumi 'squirm[s] and [becomes] suddenly quiet' at the sight of her father (p. 5). The scene could be read as illustrating the separation of Rumi's British and Indian identities. During the meeting with Rumi's parents, Mrs Gold simply tries to convey that 'Rumi is a gifted child' and deserves special attention (p. 6). But for Mahesh, the conversation turns into a cultural battle, and he becomes defensive, declaring, 'what did she take him for? And why was she so surprised that he and his daughter could string numbers together with reasonable panache? [...] He felt like making a grand statement to this woman, one that Rumi would witness' (p. 7).

Shreene, on the other hand, embodies the role of the passive spectator and continues with her duties, preparing bhajis and pouring tea. Meanwhile, Rumi, caught in the middle, fidgets in her seat 'scratching her nose and kicking her feet' in a clear display of insecurity (pp. 5-8). The enclosed, complicated space of home shown in this scene contrasts with the depiction of Rumi after she has run away from home and is standing on an open beach at the end of the novel. Her decision to move away from home and escape to Brighton can be interpreted as a way of taking control over her life and resolving her identity struggle, demonstrating that for her 'home' is not a stable, physical place she can inhabit, but rather a place she prefers not to live in. These journeys towards and out of home show Rumi's complicated identity and familial struggle and illustrates how questions of home and belonging are central to *Gifted*.

This section offers a reading of Lalwani's representation of the theme of 'home'. The argument builds on Mark Stein's definition of the essential elements in 'the construction of a place to call home'²³ for immigrants and their children. The discussion revolves around three main points drawn from Stein's argument, the first of which is the way Lalwani represents Rumi's struggle with history, images of her ancestral homeland, India, and the difference between Rumi and her parents as first and second-generation South Asian immigrants. The discussion then moves to what Stein describes as 'the combination of different aesthetic traditions and the interdependence of distinct cultural territories',²⁴ focusing on Lalwani's representation of cultural practices such as food preparation, consumption, and language choices. The final topic is the movement between various cultural spaces and different homes and how these movements can facilitate change and identity transformation. Spatial analysis is used to develop some key ideas about identity formation and the extent to which it is influenced by pressures from family and nation. The discussion includes an analysis of questions of transnationality, gender, religion, and social connections between South Asian communities in Britain and India.

The intergenerational differences between Rumi and her parents are evident in their different perceptions of home, history, and countries of origins. Rumi is a second-generation immigrant; she was born and raised in Britain and considers it to be home. Unlike her parents, who are first-generation immigrants and are fully rooted in their country of origin. Rumi understands home as dynamic and not fixed, reflecting both her country of residence and her country of origin, an understanding that reflects her interconnected, transnational experiences. This notion of 'home' resonates with Ruth Maxey and David Morley's arguments against the notion of 'rootedness' in a single homeland.²⁵ They contend that identity, especially for those with multiple homes, heritages or points of identification, is fully expressed when one inhabits more than one geographical or imagined homeland at the same time. Home becomes something that can be both experienced and felt rather than a sentimental attachment to a distant homeland. This difference in the perception of home

²³ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio state University Press, 2004), p. xii.

²⁴ Ibid, p. xii.

²⁵ David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 207.

between Rumi and her parents, complicates their relationship and causes many misunderstandings between them.

Rumi's parents' rootedness in their home country can be seen in their preference to live 'self-contained'²⁶ behind closed doors instead of adapting to the British community. Ruth Maxey in *South Asian Atlantic Literature*, argues that Indian families living abroad, like the Vasi family, are often portrayed in South Asian Atlantic writing as living 'boxed up' inside their family home away from mainstream culture.²⁷ In a sense, this notion of home represents what Gaston Bachelard describes as an 'inside space', a place where one has 'found shelter' and a place of which one has 'dreamed'.²⁸ The idea of home as an inside space represents both detachment from the outside world and inner struggle. The 'inside space' of the 'home' can reflect either 'safety, comfort, security' or 'the loss of freedom and agency'.²⁹ In Rumi's story, home is both an emotional anchor that makes her feel safe and accepted, and a place of alienation that makes her feel suffocated, different, and out of place.

Rumi's sense of displacement is compounded by her relationships to home and family. Family dynamics and loss of freedom turn the home into a space of conflict, where Rumi is unable to mediate her identity or fully belong. In her family home in Cardiff each member of the Vasi family, Shreene, Mahesh, and Nibu, struggles with their own identity and has a different sense of belonging. Rumi finds herself caught between two different realities represented by her parents. On the one hand, her father wants her to speak only English and to be more Western in order to be 'taken seriously in this country' and therefore have a better future (p. 126). Mahesh seems to hold this view from early in the novel, as evidenced by his speech to Shreene in which he urges her not to 'succumb to the temptation to hanker for and idealize the society she inhabited back home' (p. 11).

Rumi's mother, on the other hand, insists that she is Indian and feels that she was forced to move to Britain against her will. Shreene wants to show her daughter how to be 'a good Indian girl' (p. 47) and feels that living in Britain 'has messed everything up' for them

²⁶ Ruth Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 37.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 37.

²⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 39.

²⁹ Nayar, *Postcolonialism*, pp. 146-47.

as an Indian family (p. 45). Rumi's little brother Nibu's presence in the novel reinforces the gendered argument concerning the treatment of women in some South Asian cultures, which is discussed in more detail below. Trapped in the middle of these tense family dynamics, Rumi embarks on a journey of self-discovery with a burning need to create her own reality and find a 'home' to which she can finally belong.

As mentioned above, one of the main differences between Rumi's experiences in Britain and those of her parents is that her parents are first-generation immigrants who came to Britain after they reached adulthood. They therefore carry with them ideas and memories of their homeland and their extended family back in India. They are fully rooted when it comes to home because home is not just a physical place, but is also a set of relationships, cultural beliefs, and social constructs that help to shape identity and a sense of belonging. However, Yasmin Hussain explains that the identity of first-generation immigrants is heavily influenced by the immigration process.³⁰ For Shreene and Mahesh exile and distance from their country of origin and the different cultural experiences they have in Britain, not only make their struggle different from Rumi's but also create a more complicated relationship with India. These complex ideas about the distant nation are 'central to the creation of immigrant worlds' in their country of residence,³¹ which affects Shreene's and Mahesh's sense of self.

Although Shreene and Mahesh come from different parts of India, they share the religious practices of Hinduism. Shreene's family is from Haridwar, an ancient city of relative importance as a pilgrimage site in the far north of India. Raised in a strict, conservative home, Shreene was not given much choice when it came to her education, decision to marry or where to live. Her dream of taking the pre-med exam is rejected by her father on the grounds that 'it is time [for her] to get married' (p. 46). After marrying Mahesh, Shreene is 'uprooted' to Britain where she tries to create a sense of identity and replace the loss of her family with 'the necessity of housekeeping, finding her place among the steel trays and folded saris'; her world revolves 'around stretchings of chapattis' and the 'powdery rainbow of her spices' (p. 10). Throughout the novel, Shreene is presented as the caregiver for the

³⁰ Yasmin Hussain, *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 19.

³¹ Anannya Bhattacharjee, 'The Habit of Ex-Nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Immigrant Bourgeoisie', *Public Culture*, 5.1 (1992), 19–44 (p. 19).

family, a role that has long been attached to South Asian women. Christine Vogt-William suggests that, in South Asian culture, 'men are often viewed as the more active agents in travel [...] Women, often relegated to the private domestic sphere, are expected to fulfil their roles of caregivers and producers of progeny, as dictated by cultural value systems'.³² Bound by these cultural beliefs, Shreene is unable to connect with or understand her daughter's British ways of thinking (p. 138).

Mahesh hails from Azadpur, a small district near Delhi. He comes to Britain with the firm conviction that 'they had wanted him here, a foreigner with no more than five pounds in his pocket and a slip of a wife' (p. 8). The juxtaposition of the triviality of the five pounds and the description of his wife as a 'slip' is a further indication of the way women are viewed in South Asian cultures. Mahesh always acts with a military like discipline and his persistence and pursuit of excellence represents what Rumi 'hates' about him (p. 120). Throughout the novel, Mahesh seems to be tied to his home in Cardiff; the reader sees him mostly in his house and rarely anywhere else.

This portrayal of Mahesh can be seen as Lalwani's way of challenging the stereotypes and conventional structures of the South Asian family, where women are usually confined to the family home and men work outside the home. Mahesh desires to keep Rumi in their home and to keep the house discrete and away from the influence of outsiders. He separates his entire family from their cultural circle in Britain because Mahesh is obsessed with his daughter's achievements (p. 47). He even uses the term 'bound' when describing his feelings for his daughter: 'He felt bound to Rumi in the mystery of silence, hypnotized by the question-and-answer session they had been through' (p. 13). This term is highly suggestive of the kind of constraining bond between them as their relationship unravels. Thus, for Rumi the home is both a place of control and constraints placed on her by her parents, and a place that is associated with her quest for belonging and her striving to forge her own sense of identity.

³² Christine Vogt-William, *Bridges, Borders and Bodies: Transgressive Transculturality in Contemporary South Asian Diasporic Women's Novels* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2014), p. XIX. ProQuest Ebook Central.

The portrayal of the home as a place of control and constraint can, in part, be linked to gender. The representation of women in the novel can be read through the lens of theories presented by scholars, such as Anannya Bhattacharjee, and Floya Anthias, Jo Campling, and Nira Yuval-Davis,³³ in which women are associated with home and nation. These scholars analyse women of the South Asian diaspora as cultural representatives, particularly through the way they dress and behave. Anthias, Campling, and Yuval-Davis argue in the introduction to *Women – Nation – State* that because women are assigned the role of being the ‘cultural carriers’ in ethnic minorities group, they are often ‘less assimilated socially and linguistically within wider society’ and are left with the burden of transmitting the cultural heritage to their children and other young members of their community.³⁴ They continue to argue that as the ‘national reproducers’, women are expected to act like ‘proper women’ and respect the cultural boundaries placed on them.³⁵ Similarly, Michelle Superle states that in South Asian writings ‘Indian girls (and women) seem to be assigned a particularly heavy burden as the bearers of tradition’.³⁶

In *Gifted*, Rumi’s mother is depicted in a way that aligns with such social constructs, through her insistence that it is her ‘responsibility to steer her [daughter] and show her how to be a girl, an Indian girl at that’ (p. 47). Being an ‘Indian girl’ entails certain codes of behaviour and culture specific roles. It is through her mother’s stories that Rumi is able to mediate and shape her cultural identity and her connection to her ancestral home. Most of these stories are told in the kitchen, where Rumi and her mother create their own feminine shared space in the absence of Mahesh. Mahesh’s absence thus creates a more positive model of home, where Rumi can experience her cultural identity more freely through the exchange of stories and memories with her mother.

Gifted seems to critique some of the religious and cultural structures that discriminate against women in some South Asian cultures. Sailaja Krishnamurti argues that, in South Asian writings, negotiating the ‘interwoven relationships of caste, gender, race, and

³³ Bhattacharjee, *The Habit of Ex-Nomination*; Floya Anthias, Jo Campling, and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds., *Woman, Nation, State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

³⁴ Anthias, Campling, and Yuval-Davis, p. 9.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 13.

³⁶ Michelle Superle, *Contemporary English-Language Indian Children's Literature: Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 152. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

class' complicates the transnational experience of female characters and shows a 'willingness to critique and challenge the ideological structures underpinning those religious beliefs.³⁷ In *Gifted*, Hindu myths are strongly presents in Rumi's everyday life. Examples include; the shrine in Nibu's room to which Rumi goes to repent her sins and wish for good luck, the mention of 'guru Paramhansa Yogananda' by Shreene (p. 114), and 'the vow of truth' that Rumi takes in search for some spiritual guidance (p. 113). Hinduism represents some out-dated customs when it comes to the positioning of women and gender differences. According to Esha Dey, women in this system, are labelled as low-caste and are described as 'metaphysical nothingness'.³⁸ Women are seen to be only destined to marry, take care of men, and be the 'biological reproducers',³⁹ of the nation. As well, based on the laws of Manu,⁴⁰ 'no female – whether girl, young woman or old women – was allowed independence of action. A women was to be under her father's control in childhood, her husband's once married, and her son's when widowed.'⁴¹ Such beliefs and traditions could explain Mahesh's controlling behaviour towards Rumi and why this controlling behaviour is not exhibited towards Nibu, as sons are often given more freedom. On the contrary, Nibu is perceived as a personification of Shreene's father and is described as Shreene's 'jewel' who will save her from her 'estrangement' (p. 41). Such treatment further reinforces traditional gender ideology.

Also, Rumi's obsession with Bollywood movies and her endeavour to be the perfect 'desi girl' like the one's on the screen (p. 57) instead of being like 'the *goré*. The white people' (p. 45), further highlights the strong hold of Indian social constructs and myths and their effect on her identity. Vrinda Nabar argues that myths in Indian cultures are often utilized to govern women's behaviour through strengthening fear and illusion, 'there is a fundamental parity between our perpetuation of mythical stereotypes like Sita and Draupadi and our present-day reluctance to admit any change that threatens the

³⁷ Sailaja Krishnamurti, 'Weaving the Story, Pulling at the Strings: Hindu Mythology and Feminist Critique in Two Graphic Novels by South Asian Women', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 17.3 (2019), 283–301 (p. 284).

³⁸ Esha Dey, 'The Dilemma of Women', in *Women in Fiction and Fiction by Women: The Indian Scene*, ed. by C.D. Narasimhaiah and C.N. Srinath (Mysore, India: Dhvanyaloka, 1986), pp. 30–5.

³⁹ Anthias, Campling, and Yuval-Davis, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Also called the Manava Dharma Shashtra, the term literally translates to, the wise one. It is one of the standard books in Hinduism and a basic text upon which teachers base their teachings.

⁴¹ Vrinda Nabar, *Caste as Woman* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995), p. 66.

androcentric, patriarchal set-up.⁴² Myths like Sita,⁴³ Draupadi,⁴⁴ Damayanti,⁴⁵ and Savitri⁴⁶ valorise chaste, self-sacrificing conduct by depicting the image of the ideal wife, who 'seek[s] fulfilment through selfless service of their husbands.'⁴⁷ Through their strong presence in Indian cultural practices, such myths encourage women's subservience to their fathers and husbands.

Moreover, women in India are regarded to be inferior to men. As Vinda Nabar explains: 'Discrimination between the sexes in India begins at birth, or even before it'.⁴⁸ This discrimination is so deeply embedded in Indian cultural and social practices that it is seen as non-negotiable. Women are pressured to conform to certain codes of behaviour lest they be accused of 'betraying [their] national culture'.⁴⁹ In this context, what happens to Rumi towards the end of the novel, when her parents accuse her of 'have played football with [her] father's honour' (p. 245), forces her to reject her 'home' and, in a sense, her parents' cultural heritage. Evidently, the mention of 'football' in this context draws attention to the popular debate, that was sparked by Gurinder Chadha's movie *Bend It Like Beckham* in the early 2000s, about British Asian women being prevented by their families from playing sport because of certain cultural or religious traditions. Chadha's film celebrates the breaking of stereotypes by allowing its protagonist, British Indian Jesminder Bhamra or 'Jess' as she is known to her friends, to pursue her passion for football. Both Rumi and Jess have to fight to bend the rules, find their own path away from the constraints of their families, and create their own sense of belonging even if that take them away from the domestic home.

⁴² Ibid, p. 118.

⁴³ A central figure in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Sita is often referred to as "the all suffering" due to the numerous hardships and trials she endures with grace and fortitude. Her unwavering devotion to her husband, Lord Rama, and her silent endurance of suffering are seen as the ultimate expression of loyalty and moral strength.

⁴⁴ In the Hindu *Mahabharata* Draupadi marries five brothers and is extolled as an archetype of female chastity.

⁴⁵ In the Vana Parva book of the *Mahabharata*, Damayanti marries king Nala and cheerfully accompanies him to the forest after he has gamble away his kingdom. She is celebrated for her unwavering devotion to her husband.

⁴⁶ Savitri's story is celebrated as an example of an ideal wife who is wise, and virtuous. It is through her devotion and fidelity that she is able to revive her dead husband.

⁴⁷ Nabar, p. 200.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Bhattacharjee, *The Habit of Ex-Nomination*, p. 19.

Therefore, Rumi's cultural and identity struggle in *Gifted*, might be interpreted as a critique of cultural and social practices that discriminate against women.

Rumi's quest for self-discovery and her attempt to resist the cultural boundaries imposed by her parents become clear through Lalwani's portrayal of Rumi's connection to the domestic home, shown through her fluctuating relationship with her mother. As Stella Bolaki explains, 'the mother-daughter plot allows an exploration of generational and linguistic differences.'⁵⁰ In the Bildungsroman genre, the mother is an essential part of self-discovery, and the dynamic between mothers and daughters opens the way for an exploration of shifting cultural identities in the wake of immigration. One very interesting example of this is when Rumi asks her mother for a bra (p. 136). This rather simple and logical request is perceived as inappropriate by Shreene, who criticises her daughter for being 'shameless'. As a result, Rumi becomes even more defiant and determined to make her own choices.

To be sure, Rumi's mother's presence is quite influential in the narrative. Not only does it determine Rumi's connection to home and homelands but it also allows Rumi to connect to 'the past'⁵¹ and enables her to transcend ethnic boundaries to create a more hybrid identity and a dynamic sense of belonging. It is through her mother's stories about India that she is able to understand her cultural heritage. It is interesting that these stories are mostly told in the kitchen, turning it into a site of complicated cultural encounters and experiences. This image of the kitchen as a culturally charged space seem to reoccur in much ethnic minority women's writing, for instance, Hazel Carby's *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands*.⁵² In this autobiography, Carby reflects that by being the 'sole audience for her mother's stories' in the kitchen she is able to preserve 'her memories'.⁵³ Much like Rumi and her mother, Carby's shared experience with her mother in the kitchen is enhanced by the chance to 'avoid remembering' the father.⁵⁴ In this context, women are once again presented as carriers of cultural memories, and it is up to them to maintain a connection with their distant homeland. As Rumi grows up, however, this shared space transforms into

⁵⁰ Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman*, p. 23.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 24.

⁵² Hazel V. Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2021).

⁵³ Ibid, p. 117.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 117.

a confrontational, conflictual one. Her conversations with her mother end up with Rumi being torn between two different worlds, or as her mother puts it, between 'our people' and 'white people' (p. 81).

In addition, it is through the songs her mother sings to Nibu that Rumi creates a connection with Hindi, as a language of belonging to this cultural heritage. Through her mother and the concept of the motherland, Rumi sees her resemblance to the 'sea of Indian faces' (p. 26) and feels 'a warm sense of her own instant belonging in a world of brown faces' (p. 156) at Delhi airport. Elaine Savory Fido explains that a 'Mother belongs to a culture and a country, which becomes ours, and gives us our first social identity'.⁵⁵ However, when the relationship with the mother is disturbed or broken for any reason, a person may seek an 'adoptive country, a place where we might hope to lose the sense of pain and inadequacy which stems from the difficulties in our relationship with our source of self-image'.⁵⁶ This could explain Rumi's decision to leave her family and create new memories in another place that could offer a more stable sense of home and belonging.

Rumi's unresolved relationship with home is also seen through Lalwani's use of the themes of language and food, which is the second element in Mark Stein's discussion of what might contribute to constructing a sense of home. Stein describes this element as the 'aesthetic traditions' and cultural practices that, combined, can help establish a connection to 'home'.⁵⁷ Rumi's mother brings additional depth to the narrative by using Hindi words, which underscores the importance of the theme of language in the novel. Although the novel is written in English the use of many Hindi words, especially by Shreene, emphasises the sense of in-betweenness and gives readers a more intimate insight into the inner struggles of immigrants, as language has the power to express 'cultural experiences'.⁵⁸ Also, Hindi words can be seen as Shreene's way of maintaining a connection with her distant 'homeland' and defying the cultural restrictions imposed by her husband, Mahesh. Whenever Shreene feels angry or frustrated she resorts to Hindi. As observed by Rumi, 'It

⁵⁵ Elaine Savory Fido, 'Mother/lands: Self and Separation in the Work of Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head and Jean Rhys', in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: The Women's Press, 1991), pp. 330–49 (p. 331).

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 331.

⁵⁷ Stein, *Black British Literature*, p. xii.

⁵⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), p. 38.

was a kind of joke that Nibu thought Mahesh's name was "listen" in Hindi – Soono' (p. 95). Shreene's expression in Hindi creates more struggle for Rumi because it is a constant reminder of a culture she will never fully belong to and a language she cannot understand. Language becomes one of the obstacles that limits communication between Rumi and her mother and thus conditions Rumi's relationship with home.

Significantly, Rumi's addiction to eating cumin, 'the needly brown seeds' (p. 93), seems to reflect her troubled relationship with home, adding further meaning to the narrative as Rumi moves between multiple homes. The addiction begins after a clash with her family at the beginning of the second part of the novel. It is arguably central to the narrative and further underlines the depth of Rumi's identity struggle. The preservation of cultural traditions through food and 'ethnic consumption' has been described by Pramod K Nayar as a source of 'identity' and a sense of connection to home.⁵⁹ Rumi grows up watching her mother in the kitchen making traditional food, which was her mother's way of maintaining her Indian heritage. As Shashikala Muthumal Assella argues, 'food is a memory that enables diasporic communities to recollect their specific pasts, their familiar surroundings and most importantly their roots.'⁶⁰ Also, Shreene uses food as a medium to convey feelings and emotions, as can be seen in her statement to her daughter when asked why she takes so many biscuits to their relatives in India, 'I want them to taste what we taste so they can feel it too' (p. 27).

In the above context, it is striking that Rumi's addiction suddenly stops when she goes to India with her family, as her hunger for Indian culture is satisfied. Her addiction to cumin ends when she moves away from home to Oxford for the first time, leaving behind the cultural and familial pressures associated with home. This shows that food is not used here for its nutritional properties but rather as a symbol of the fragmentation of identity, in a manner similar to Rushdie's theorisation of the 'broken mirrors' where the shards and fragmentation 'made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities'.⁶¹ Rumi's addiction to cumin can thus be seen as a result of her identity struggle

⁵⁹ Nayar, *Postcolonialism*, p. 121.

⁶⁰ Shashikala Muthumal Assella, 'Kitchen Politics and the Search for an Identity: *The Mango Season*', in *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. by Sandhya Rao Mehta (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2015), pp. 119–33 (p. 120).

⁶¹ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 11.

and the difficulty of living between two cultures or two homes without fully belonging to either. Rumi's sense of belonging changes as she moves between different homes, creating 'new spaces of transformation' that enable her to mediate her identity change.⁶²

I now turn to the final element described by Stein in his discussion of what constructs a sense of home: movement and cultural change. The discussion explores mobility and movement between different homes and how it relates to Lalwani's exploration of identity in the novel. The analysis covers the different locations depicted in the novel: India, Oxford, and Brighton. Lalwani's mapping of space, particularly the two trips to India, seems to probe the nature of Rumi's connection to her ancestral homeland. Each of her visits to India causes a major shift in her identity formation. Such visits to the 'ancestral homelands' are seen as a 'rite of passage' for second-generation (im)migrants, through which they try to find answers to their identity struggles and sense of belonging.⁶³

Caught in a liminal state that hinders her self-discovery, Rumi embarks on a journey to India to discover another part of her identity that has, until now, only been accessible to her through her mother's stories. The unstable shifts in Rumi's identity are further intensified by Lalwani's portrayal of the airport as a gateway of mobility from one 'home' to the other. In the airport Rumi can see 'human faces magnified in the steel as they walked past' (p. 153) and hear the airport announcements as 'excitingly alien' (p. 26), a description that is reminiscent of Mark Augé's analysis of airports as 'non-places' where humans are identified 'only on entering or leaving'.⁶⁴ Inside an airport all people are the same, rushing to follow instructions that tell them where to go. Yet, as Rumi moves through the airport space, she begins to reassess her sense of self. She feels 'a warm sense of her own belonging in a world of brown faces' (p. 156) which contrasts sharply with Mahesh's inability to identify with a 'sea of white faces' when he and Rumi went to the school meeting (p. 14), thus emphasising the power of resemblance in identity formation. The airport is transformed into a congested space that marks a shift in Rumi's sense of belonging as she moves from Britain to India.

⁶² Stein, *Black British Literature*, p. XII.

⁶³ See: Ruth Maxey's chapter, 'Close Encounters with Ancestral Space: Travel and Return', in *South Asian Atlantic literature, 1970-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

⁶⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 111.

In addition, the airport is a space where Rumi can reflect on her relationship with her mother. Watching her mother 'pull a suitcase off the conveyor-belt' (p. 26), Rumi recalls a line of poetry she has read: 'Nobody, not even the rain has such small hands' (p. 26). The poem by E.E. Cummings could be interpreted as an exploration of how too much love and care can suffocate a person, therefore mirroring Rumi's uncertainty and contradictory feelings. It is also at the airport that Rumi experiences what it is like to be seen ('everywhere she looks people seem to be looking back at them' (p. 26)) and to be a target of the 'male gaze' (p. 157). These experiences in the airport seem to give Rumi a small space of freedom, but one tempered by a heightened awareness of how she is perceived in relation to gender and sexuality. Thus, these trips to India creates more identity struggles for Rumi rather than resolving any.

In the novel, Rumi takes two trips to India: one at the age of eight and the other when she turns fifteen, as a gift from her parents for completing her exams. On the first trip, Rumi and her mother travel alone without Mahesh, to attend Shreene's father funeral. During this visit, Rumi is introduced to her extended family for the first time. Rumi experiences India as a culturally enchanted place, where 'the air [is] hazy with possibility' (p. 36). During the trip, her mother once again takes on the role of cultural mediator and translates into English so that Rumi can understand. Rumi experiences the 'spiritual quest' of pilgrimage, which in South Asian cultures and Hinduism is associated with 'the question of home or homelessness' and subjects visiting their homelands must complete the quest before achieving true belonging.⁶⁵

Rumi and her mother are instructed by the palm reader to 'make a pilgrimage to Mansadevi, the place of wishes' (p. 30), an important practice in Hindu culture that is said to help people understand their past and future lives. However, during this visit Rumi and her mother are treated as foreigners by the train inspector: 'Madam, seems to me you are from abroad, [...] and you only drinking bottled water' (p. 33). This interaction highlights Rumi's awareness of her in-betweenness, unable to achieve full belonging in either Britain or India. When they reach Mansadevi, where they are supposed to ask the goddess to grant a wish, Rumi seems lost and confused as she asks her cousin 'what if there are too many thoughts

⁶⁵ Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic literature*, p. 110.

messing up your mind' (p. 36), which could be taken as an indication of her uncertainty about where she really wants to belong. One of the things that makes this Indian trip so enriching and memorable for Rumi is the sense of freedom she feels away from her father's controlling influence. The memories of the trip remain with Rumi as a safe anchor and something to protect her from her unbearable reality.

However, the depiction of this journey as a series of stories, not all of which are Rumi's memories is highly suggestive. It reflects the fallibility of memory and its role in the construction of a sense of self. Rumi's memories of India are like the 'broken mirrors' that Salman Rushdie describes in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', an image that connects all the works discussed in this thesis. In the essay, Rushdie discusses his own position as a writer who has lived in the Indian subcontinent and in Britain, as well as that of writers of Indian descent who try to write about an India they have never lived in through images and stories: 'It may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost'.⁶⁶ In a similar way, Rumi strives to put back together images of an India that she barely remembers, but there are so many lost pieces. It is only through her mother's stories that she is able to remember, 'Rumi had a sense of the events and conversation, but it was Shreene who had painted in the rest, picking out moments in careful details' (p. 35).

The second Indian trip takes place when Rumi is an adolescent, and she comes to India hoping for a taste of the freedom she experienced during her earlier visit. Even before reaching her destination, Rumi describes her transformation into a 'new, indefinable person' (p. 154). During the journey Rumi fulfils her desire to experience her first kiss as a 'rite of passage' into adulthood. In recounting this experience, the narrative suddenly shifts to the present tense, which might be an indication of how strongly this encounter has affected Rumi and that the feelings she experiences will stay with her for a long time. Nevertheless, the experience leaves Rumi sad and heartbroken, and she no longer sees India as a magical place. Her perception of India seems to be connected to her inner struggles and emotional state. Indeed, after Rumi's failed love adventure, India suddenly seems to have

⁶⁶ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 11.

lost its charm. She begins to see India through a different lens, as a land filled with heartache and unfulfilled dreams. Ultimately, Rumi's trips to India do not provide Rumi with any solution when it comes to her identity struggle. They only increase her sense of dislocation and in-betweenness.

Both trips contribute to Rumi's changing sense of self and further complicate her relationship with home. The two trips are taken at two different stages of her life and thus reflect the development of her identity struggle. On the first trip, she is still a child and is mainly exposed to Indian culture through her parents. Therefore, as mentioned above, India becomes a place she dreams of living in, which might be a result of connecting 'romantic notions' to the idea of a homeland as these notions are usually facilitated through mobility between different homes.⁶⁷

On the second journey, however, she is more aware of the different aspects of her British and Indian identities. Rumi feels like a stranger in India on this trip and begins to notice the suffering associated with the place, perhaps because she is now more rooted in Britain and has a future in Oxford University to look forward to, away from her home environment and her parents' control. Rumi's relationship with home is unstable, as emphasised by the fact that she moves back and forth between different homes throughout the novel. When she returns from her last trip to India, Rumi has to move away from home once more. This time, the move is to Oxford, where she is to begin her university studies shortly after turning fifteen. Rumi spends only two days a week in Oxford, returning to her family home in Cardiff for the rest of the week.

Rumi's struggle between multiple homes, cultures, and points of identifications enhances her identity struggle, as evident in her interactions with the mirror in the novel. When visiting India, Rumi's self-awareness and identity struggle is expressed in the way she compares herself to her cousin Bunny using a mirror imagery. Rumi explains that speaking to her cousin is 'like looking into a dirty mirror. Somehow the very enchantment and grace of her movements, the lucid conviction of her speech, the proud purity of her mind combined to present you with a shabby and much murkier picture of yourself' (p. 163).

⁶⁷ Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani, eds., *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 4.

Rumi's inability to see any resemblance with her cousin marks a turning point in her identity struggle and her relationship with India. Once again, this dirty mirror connects to Rushdie's distorted reflections in the 'broken mirror' and Du Bois's 'double consciousness'. Also, on her first night at Oxford University, Rumi is depicted staring at herself in the mirror. Cursing and calling herself names,

she glared at herself in the mirror and opened her mouth [...] "what am I doing?" She said, in a quiet, very normal voice. "I am mad". "You are mad", she said, to her reflection, in a stern reprimand. "You weirdo." She frowned at herself.' (pp. 191 -92).

Rumi's struggle and feelings of alienation are clear in both these interactions with the mirror. By describing her reflection as 'you weirdo' Rumi seemingly tries to distance herself from a reality she has no control over. She finds it difficult to navigate her identity both in Britain and India.

Rumi's dislocation proves that her movements to and from home are not just physical but rather internal psychological shifts. In order to adapt to her new situation in Oxford, Rumi has to invent two separate identities. When she is back home, she resumes 'the identity she had built up as a genius' (p. 203), and tries so hard to 'safeguard everything that needed to be kept hidden' (p. 199). However, these separate identities begin to take their toll and put her under great pressure.

The time Rumi spends away from her family, at Oxford, allows her to discover more aspects of her identity and makes her world 'a beautiful world in which it was possible to live without cumin' (p. 200), until another confrontation with her parents takes place. This time, it is over the family honour, another incident in which the struggle between the generations is evident. For Rumi, her relationship with Fareed, a Muslim boy, is a form of self-discovery, of transgressing boundaries and rebelling against the cultural constraints imposed by her parents. She tries to reinvent herself without adhering to the values of the community. For her parents, however, a relationship before marriage is considered a taboo. They are not prepared to accept or even talk about Rumi's behaviour, because Rumi no longer fulfils the cultural expectations of being 'a good Indian girl'.⁶⁸ They threaten to disown her or even kill her. Their reaction puts Rumi under even more pressure, as she does

⁶⁸ Superle, *Contemporary English-Language*, p. 152.

not want to return to her parents' control after experiencing freedom at Oxford. Finding herself in an in-between state, she is forced to choose between giving up her freedom and conforming to the cultural restriction placed by her parents or to leaving everything behind, choosing her independence and being considered an outsider to her own culture. As a result, Rumi begins to self-harm, throwing herself against the wall and breaking the oven with a chair (pp. 247-8). As Christine Vogt-William observes in her discussion of cultural representations of South Asian women, occupying a position between different cultures can lead to 'the loss of identity, confusion or madness - and at its worst, loss of life'.⁶⁹ Thus, the image of the 'homeland' that Rumi dreamed of returning to is overwhelmed by 'a sense of psychological homelessness',⁷⁰ where 'home' no longer carries positive associations.

To resolve her identity struggle, Rumi decides to escape to Brighton, a city that is portrayed by the narrator of Hanif Kureishi's *Intimacy* as a place 'where all runners and lost individualists end up'.⁷¹ Interestingly *Intimacy* is the novel that Z, the protagonist of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, which I discuss in the last chapter of the thesis, decides to read during her trip around Europe. The final image in *Gifted* is of Rumi standing on the open beach of Brighton looking out to the sea, as her mother watches her from a distance. The image can be seen as a reference to the separateness created by cultural differences. The scene is also reminiscent of Charlotte Williams's description of the sea in her memoir *Sugar and Slate*. She remembers how the sea made her feel good with its 'powerful collective memory for all the diaspora peoples' when she first moved to 'a very white patch of Wales', 'a sea that brimmed over with beginnings and endings, reminding us of passages of the past, of our present and our future. We would always be able to look outwards. [and never feel] hemmed in by boundary or border'.⁷² Hence, looking at the tide go in and out while 'shivering' (p. 273), Rumi is reminded of places beyond Britain and of her own identity that is in a constant flux, between her country of residence and her ancestral country.

Rumi's identity struggle might never come to an end. The numbers song she sings as a child ends 'with a comfortable monotone' when it reaches sixteen and we are told that

⁶⁹ Vogt-William, *Bridges, Borders and Bodies*, p. 17.

⁷⁰ Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic Literature*, p. 29.

⁷¹ Hanif Kureishi, *Intimacy* (London: Scribner, 1999), p. 64.

⁷² Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2002), p. 185.

Rumi 'clung to the melody like a life-jacket' (p. 17). But how does this relate to Rumi? Does she have her happy ending at sixteen after she decides to 'unhome' herself and take full control of 'the measure' of her 'dwelling'.⁷³ Readers are never told how she feels after escaping her family house in Cardiff and going to Brighton because the narrative stops following her and the conversation between her and readers of the novel is disconnected. Instead, the narrative returns to Shreene and Mahesh, explaining the public scrutiny they suffer and how they feel rejected as if they 'committed heinous acts in their past lives, acts that must have been disgusting beyond belief' (p. 271). The passage invokes the spiritual concept of Karma, suggesting that what happened with Rumi is a result of past action they have no control over but must suffer the consequence of.

The way the novel ends raises a very important question of perspective: is Lalwani trying to detach herself from the assumption that she accepts the abandoning of cultural heritage in order to pursue one's own identity? Ruvani Ranasinha explains that minority writers are often encumbered by 'the burden of representation', and the 'assumption that [they] speak for the entire culture or community from which they come.'⁷⁴ Also, South Asian women writers are usually faced with many difficulties, as 'national daughters', when exploring themes of identity that include female children trying to abandon traditional roles and trying to achieve autonomy away from the control of their families.⁷⁵ The fact that Lalwani intentionally diverted from describing Rumi's emotion after escaping her family home in Cardiff makes the story more complicated and open to different interpretations. The novel's ending contrasts with the tendency to depict optimistic images of Britishness and the ease of assimilation that seems to prevail in the 2000s. For instance, Zadie Smith explains that in *White teeth* she entertained a 'very optimistic idea' of creating 'the possibility of a community which involved so many different people',⁷⁶ a notion that *Gifted* seems to oppose.

⁷³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 13.

⁷⁴ Ruvani Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6.

⁷⁵ Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 109.

⁷⁶ 'An interview with Zadie Smith', *Masterpiece*, 2003

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/teeth/ei_smith_int.html> [accessed 28 January 2021].

Education, Racism, and Cultural Encounters

In this section the argument will revolve around Lalwani's representation of the theme of education in the novel and its connection to immigrants' integration to the British society and colonial history. As mentioned above, Rumi's mobility, especially out of the home, gives her much needed freedom to construct an individual sense of self. Through her movement to school, the library, and Oxford University, education plays an important role in Rumi's identity development. The section will start by explaining the tension caused by Rumi's label as gifted and how it affects her life at home and in school. Then I will move onto the importance of mathematics and literature in the novel and the depth these subjects bring through their colonial and post-colonial connections. Also, I will place some focus on the library as a site of internal struggle for Rumi and a place in which she can exert some freedom away from home. Lastly, the discussion will focus on Rumi's education as a girl from South Asian cultural backgrounds, living in Britain and her time at Oxford University.

The title of the novel itself hints at the cultural struggle embedded in Rumi's educational journey. Her father rejects the term 'gifted', so the title of the novel reflects the label given to her by her Cardiff teachers, and in a sense a more British way of looking to education. Thus, from early in the novel Rumi is confronted with two different cultural attitudes regarding her 'gift' or 'hard work'. The first belongs to her father, who represents her South Asian cultural heritage, where children are expected to work hard to establish themselves in society and gain respected jobs. Sarfraz Manzoor in his review of *Gifted* in the *Guardian* explains that education exerts a 'powerful hold on the immigrant imagination. For first-generation immigrants, whose own dreams and aspirations were often thwarted by the cold reality of racism, it represented the means by which their children would be able to deflect discrimination' and make their family proud.⁷⁷ The second is the teacher, who represents British culture, in which the identification of her gift is seen as a gateway to assimilation into British society. Through her identification as gifted in maths at age five, her

⁷⁷ Sarfraz Manzoor, 'Freedom by Numbers', *The Guardian*, 30 June 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jun/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview21>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

father's strict library routine, her aspiration to study in Oxford before she turns fifteen, and her secret obsession with literature, education is presented as a central theme in the novel.

However, the novel, which is set in the 1980s and was written in the early 2000s, highlights the cultural and political changes both before and during these periods, an awareness of which may help in our understanding of the educational spaces represented in the text. Mathematics and literature, which exert great influence on Rumi's journey, are also significant topics when examined through a colonial and postcolonial lens in relation to the Indian subcontinent. The discussion of education in the novel will focus on issues relating to the pressure placed on second-generation immigrants by their parents and will revolve around three distinct places that play a significant role in terms of Rumi's identity and familial struggle. The first is Rumi's school, in which her sense of ethnic difference is initially experienced. The second is the library in central Cardiff, which offers clues as to how her mobility and movement out of the controlled space of the house facilitates change in her understanding of her cultural surroundings. The third involves Rumi's time at Oxford University, which represents the emergence of a new identity that lasts until she scatters her notes around Oxford's Bodleian Library, describing them as 'so sweet, almost edible' (p. 266) before deciding to abandon her studies and move to Brighton.

Most of the tension between Rumi and her parents results from her status as a maths prodigy and their desire to see her fulfil her potential. From the outset, an emphasis is placed on education, which lies at the root of the rifts between Rumi's family and her school, as represented by her teacher. Mrs Gold, the teacher, tries to convince them that the school believes 'that Rumi deserves to have this gift nurtured' (p. 7), but Rumi's parents insist that her gift is a result of their hard work; as her father puts it, 'Myself and my wife take [...] Rumika's education very seriously. We are pleased that she is doing well in her studies and that her hard work has paid off' (p. 6). Mahesh goes on to say that he is 'also a mathematician and [he is] glad that she [Rumi] is doing well in this subject, as [he has] placed emphasis on it' (p. 7). Mahesh tries to imply that Rumi's gift is a result of his own agency and hard work since he is

Dr Mahesh Vasi, PhD, a man who had begun his career repeating times tables under a large tree in Patiala [...] now he was here, working just over an hour's

commute [...] employed by the University of Swansea, sub-set of the University of Wales itself' (p. 8).

Mahesh rejects labelling Rumi as special and gifted and instead focuses the conversation on his own achievements and heritage. Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain suggest that many young South Asian women find themselves in a situation similar to Rumi's, as their parents pressure them to do better at school and then attribute their educational success to their own hard work,⁷⁸ which causes tension between the children and their parents and causes an unstable relationship between them.

After the initial identification of Rumi's gift, the tension between home and school begins to rise. In an article in *The Guardian* titled 'Too much, too young', Lalwani explains how this tension between home and school develops:

naming a child as gifted often means foisting a whole lot of societally desirable (usually adult) dreams and expectations upon the child, the label itself becoming the gift that promises to open doors. Likewise, gifted education believers seem to see the flipside—the child's gift (like the power of a superhero) is an inexplicable force for good that needs to be isolated, harnessed and protected from damage at all costs.⁷⁹

At a very young age, Rumi is placed under significant pressure by both her parents and the British education system. Her parents and her school focus on nourishing her 'superhero powers' (her gift) and neglect Rumi's social and emotional needs. As time passes Rumi becomes overwhelmed by this gift, which in her view mutates into a form of punishment: 'it [is] a punishment for something, not a gift.' (p. 108). The pressure builds to such an extent that she stops going to school and becomes completely isolated from her school friends, her social surroundings, and her parents. Her focus shifts entirely to passing her exams in order to fulfil the promise that will 'open doors' for her: 'my exam is my freedom' (p. 142). The notion of university acceptance as a gateway to freedom is mentioned earlier in the novel—during Rumi's first trip to India when she is eight, her aunt Badi informs her that her cousin Jaggi has been admitted to Delhi University and has thereby 'bought himself some freedom' away from his family (p. 36). Following her trip, Rumi becomes even more determined,

⁷⁸ Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain, 'Negotiating Mobility: South Asian Women and Higher Education', *Sociology* (Oxford) 50.1 (2016), 43–59 (pp. 45–7).

⁷⁹ Nikita Lalwani, 'Too Much, Too Young', *The Guardian*, 23 September 2008 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/23/education.children>> [accessed 26 February 2021].

convinced that Oxford University is the only means of escaping her family's control. However, even after achieving her dream of going to Oxford, the education system fails her again as she is too young to handle the pressure of the university's intense classes and exams. In her classes, she feels 'panic in the base of her stomach' because she often struggles to understand the topics being discussed (p. 201). Rumi realises that her gift is not sufficient to allow her to remain at the university, and she begins to feel 'stupid' and 'empty' (p. 203).

It is clear, then, that Rumi's educational journey is not an easy one. After Rumi is pronounced gifted, her father implements a very strict library routine, whereby 'every day she was supposed to go to the library and work from four to six o'clock on twenty problems set by her father' (p. 18). The time Rumi spends in the library marks a significant turning point in the development of her identity. She associates the space of the library with loneliness, silence, and the consumption of culture, and the silence and the 'anonymity of people' make Rumi 'feel nervous' (p. 19). She expresses her fear of the gaze of the other (the librarian) and how it reflects on her self-awareness and her realisation that she is unseen and unnoticed: 'She stared at the librarian between each portion of time [...] But the librarian did not watch her back' (p. 21). The library does, however, facilitate movement between cultures and an element of freedom for Rumi. In the library she develops a new passion for English literature; she reads all six novels of 'Malory Towers' by children's author Enid Blyton and almost the entire series of the 58 'Chalet School' books by Elinor M. Brent-Dyer (pp. 21, 82). It is interesting that all her reading choices feature boarding schools, since the theme is often connected with journeys toward self-discovery and achieving independence. It seems that Rumi longs for the freedom of exploring new aspects of her identity away from her parents' pressure that a boarding school would provide.

The library is also the space in which she grows into an adolescent and first rebels against family pressures, stealing sweets from the nearby stores. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of attempting to take control over her life and accepting the consequences for her actions. Stealing and shoplifting can be seen as responses to deprivation, whereby adolescents feel insecure since they lack the necessary social and cultural surroundings to

enable them to progress and cope better with school-related stress.⁸⁰ For Rumi the act is liberating; it is akin to ‘entering a fantasy world’ (p. 23) in which she takes pleasure in ‘relying on her wits’. It takes the form of an adventure over which she has full control, unlike her real life, in which every step is dictated by her parents and their high expectations.

Several studies, including that of Bic Ngo, have explained that even though South Asians are known to be high achievers, ‘their education is also fraught with tensions from intergenerational conflict arising out of family and gender role expectations as well as racism’.⁸¹ Such tension is overtly depicted in Rumi’s story. Her parents pressure her to do well in school and to enter university before she turns fourteen, in part ‘to fulfil her potential’ since ‘if she wants to be taken seriously in this country, she will have to do a lot more than just fulfil it’ (p. 126). Mahesh goes on to declare that ‘when you are in a minority, if you apply yourself you can achieve anything in life’ (p. 126). Regarding education, Diane Wolf, in a study of Filipino immigrants to the United States, explains that immigrant parents treat their daughters differently from their sons and that this behaviour is usually connected ‘to parental control, particularly over daughters’ whereabouts and their sexuality’,⁸² which becomes apparent when Rumi’s parents seek the help of ‘the Aunti’, Mrs Mukherjee, to keep an eye on Rumi during her two-days-a-week stay at Oxford and report back to them every night at eight o’clock.

However, in many South Asian cultures, girls are often seen to represent a challenge to male authority, gender norms, and traditional cultural structure when they choose to pursue higher education instead of marrying.⁸³ Rumi is subjected to such social pressure, with her mother insisting that ‘her maths and long words and storybooks weren’t going to save her when she grew up’ (p. 46) and that when ‘the time came for marriage, she feared her daughter would be rejected left, right and centre for her gawky gait, thick glasses, her generally antisocial behaviour [...] they would make life hell for her, and she would become a joke’ (p. 47). Shreene goes on to suggest that it is the ‘western way of thinking’ that

⁸⁰ Victor M. Rios, ‘Stealing a Bag of Potato Chips: And Other Adolescent Crimes of Resistance’, *Contexts (Berkeley, Calif.)*, 11.1 (2012), 48–53 (p. 53).

⁸¹ Bic Ngo, ‘Learning from the Margins: The Education of Southeast and South Asian Americans in Context’, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 9.1 (2006), 51–65 (p. 55).

⁸² Wolf, ‘Family Secrets’, pp. 465–66.

⁸³ Ngo, p. 59.

corrupts her daughter, a notion that accords with a study conducted by Priya Khambhaita that suggested Indian parents, especially mothers, worry that by attending schools and colleges their daughters will be corrupted by 'western values'.⁸⁴

Such cultural attitudes towards marriage and education can also be seen in Mahesh's hesitation in telling their family in India that Rumi has been accepted at Oxford — 'what would they say, other than that it sounded good? It wasn't as if he was announcing Rumi's engagement, where there was a set procedure of joint celebration' (p. 178). A link between educational success and becoming more western is suggested by Mahesh in the novel. Following Rumi's admission to the university, Mahesh and Shreene go with her to help her settle in Mrs Mukherjee's house; Mahesh thinks to himself that, at fifteen, Rumi now 'seemed suddenly so British, Western' and bore a 'Caucasian significance' (p. 186). Mahesh links education to race, suggesting that becoming more educated and thus western denotes becoming white.

Through this comment, Lalwani creates connections with issues of race that prevailed during the 1980s, especially in the wake of Margaret Thatcher's 1978 speech about immigrants 'swamping' Britain, which reinforced the identification of Britishness with whiteness. Thatcher expressed, in a television interview, concerns that some people felt Britain might be 'rather swamped by people with different cultures,'⁸⁵ mainly highlighting fears regarding the impact of new immigrants on British society and its cultural fabric. Her use of the term 'swamped' stoked racial prejudice and concerns about the degree that immigrants could alter 'real' Britain. By voicing these concerns, Thatcher reinforced the identification of Britishness with whiteness, implying that non-white immigrants endangered the racial and cultural homogeneity of Britain. This rhetoric had a long lasting influence on both public discourse and the political scene in Britain, shaping the conversation around race, identity, and belonging for years. Thatcher's speech is said to be an echo of Enoch Powell's 1967 'river of blood' speech, which, according to writers like Hanif Kureishi, 'helped create racism in Britain and was directly responsible not only for the

⁸⁴ Priya Khambhaita, 'Indian Mothers' Perceptions of Their Roles in Their Daughters' University Course Choices', *British Educational Research Journal*, 40.6 (2014), 1019–035 (p. 1022).

⁸⁵ Stuart Jeffries, "'Swamped' and 'Riddled': the Toxic Words that Wreck Public Discourse", *the Guardian*, 27 October 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/27/swamped-and-riddled-toxic-phrases-wreck-politics-immigration-michael-fallon>> [accessed 04 April 2024].

atmosphere of fear and hatred, but through his influence, for individual acts of violence'.⁸⁶ In this context, Mahesh's remark about his daughter is very suggestive of the struggle immigrants faced in the 1980s to both maintain their cultural identity and assimilate into the British society.

Mahesh's observation that his daughter's educational advancement leads her to become more 'western' can also be understood with reference to colonial education, with an emphasis on the power relations between Britain and the colonized Indian subcontinent. In terms of the history of education in India, one of the major shifts in the country was the introduction of the Charter Act in 1813. Through the implementation of this act, Britain proposed 'to undertake the education of the native subjects' in India, which led to the promotion of both the English language and its literature.⁸⁷ It is also worth noting that 'from the 1820s to the mid-1850s English literary studies had a predominantly religious and moral function in the Indian curriculum'⁸⁸ while the discipline of English literature was not introduced to the British curriculum until 1871.

Consequently, English literature provided the necessary means, through the medium of the English language, to provide an education that is deprived of the social and linguistic attributes of the community.⁸⁹ Even after the end of the British colonial presence in India, its effect on the Indian educational system, its linguistic structure and its literature persisted. Harish Trivedi, in an article titled 'Colonial Influence, Postcolonial Intertextuality: Western Literature and Indian Literature', suggests that the influence exerted by the English over Indian literature may be one of the most profound in modern culture.⁹⁰ The influence was not limited to the introduction of new literary forms and genres; it also included the establishment of English as the language of the educated elite.⁹¹ English remains the

⁸⁶ Hanif Kureishi, *Dreaming and Scheming: reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 28.

⁸⁷ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 24–30.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 142.

⁸⁹ Braj B. Kachru, 'The Alchemy of English', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 291–95 (pp. 292–93).

⁹⁰ See: Harish Trivedi, 'Colonial Influence, Postcolonial Intertextuality: Western Literature and Indian Literature', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 43.2 (2007), 121–33.

⁹¹ Jenny Sharpe, 'Figures of Colonial Resistance', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 99–103 (p. 100).

language of India's 'intellectual make-up' to the present day.⁹² The establishment of such an educational system led, in turn, to a 'domination' over 'the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world'.⁹³ Thus, based on Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's reasoning about how colonial education 'colonises the mind', Mahesh's description of his daughter might be read as a self-definition in relation to the culture of the colonizer and a way of seeing her educational advancement in a western country as a way of raising above her 'assigned position in life'.⁹⁴

In the novel, there are some cultural contradictions when it comes to literature that can be related to this longer history. In India, both Rumi's mother and her cousin, Bunny, study literature and they are encouraged by their families to do so. While in Britain, Rumi's parents are opposed to her reading fiction for fear that it will corrupt her mind and drive her away from her Indian cultural heritage, making her more western. They are happy that Rumi is gifted in maths because, as explained by Alan J. Bishop, mathematics 'has somehow always been felt to be universal and, therefore, culture-free [...] It had in colonial times, and for most people, it continues to have today, the status of a culturally neutral phenomenon in the otherwise turbulent waters of education'.⁹⁵ This perhaps explains Rumi's fascination with numbers, as she finds freedom in maths, which for her appears free of both contextual and cultural influence. Studying maths represents an opportunity to escape from her cultural struggle to the safety of predefined mathematical truths. As Nina Englehart points out, maths has always 'been understood to deal with ideal constructs that escape the restrictions of the given world'.⁹⁶ But the novel's portrayal of maths is much more ambiguous and is shaped by cultural influence.

⁹² Raja Rao, 'Language and Spirit', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 276–373 (p. 296).

⁹³ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o., *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: J. Currey, 1986), p. 16.

⁹⁴ Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, p. 143.

⁹⁵ Alan J. Bishop, 'Western Mathematics: The Secret Weapon of Cultural Imperialism', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1994), pp. 71–76 (p. 71).

⁹⁶ Nina Engelhardt, *Modernism, Fiction and Mathematics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 2.

Maths is, for Rumi, also connected to her identity and sense of self. She describes people as numbers and gives these numbers a distinct personality—her father, for example, is like the number 512, and ‘five hundred and twelve was a lovely number. Really friendly. It made her think of her dad’s big, warm, open hands’ before he became so obsessed ‘with mental arithmetic and getting the right answer’ (p. 17). The number 127 is, on the other hand, ‘everything she wasn’t’, ‘lucky and sexy, cheeky and cool’ (p. 113). While in Oxford, Mrs Mukherjee appears strange to Rumi—she has no interest in Rumi’s life, so Rumi defines her as a ‘minus figure with no square root’ (p. 194). She uses maths to escape from difficult, uncomfortable situations through counting, as though counting removes her from her reality into an imaginative world similar to those in fiction. Balee Brits has argued that ‘the act of counting’ has always forged links with literature; as it has always been central to literature in the sense that ‘poetic measure relies on number’.⁹⁷

However, mathematics and literature are often considered to be opposing disciplines—mathematics ‘constitute[s] authoritative knowledge; yet, literature draws on the privileged position’.⁹⁸ When studying maths, Rumi feels pressured to satisfy her father’s high standards—she wants to be like Shakuntala Devi, an Indian mathematician who was regarded as a genius and a ‘human calculator’, and see her parents’ eyes ‘widening in bewilderment’ (p. 38). While mathematics represents her father’s control, however, the field is deeply connected to India’s colonial history. Western influence over colonial countries was not restricted to language and literature but also extended to include other subjects, including mathematics, as explained by Alan Bishop:

At worst, the mathematics curriculum was abstract, irrelevant, selective and elitist—as indeed it was in Europe—governed by structures like the Cambridge Overseas Certificate, and culturally laden to a very high degree. It was part of a deliberate strategy of acculturation—international in its efforts to instruct in ‘the best of the West’, and convinced of its superiority to any indigenous mathematical systems and culture.⁹⁹

Rumi’s experience in Oxford can be read through the lens of Bishop’s observation. The elitist mathematical tuition at Oxford makes her feel ‘stupid, empty, not knowing

⁹⁷ Baylee Brits, *Literary Infinities: Number and Narrative in Modern Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 1.

⁹⁸ Engelhardt, *Modernism, Fiction and Mathematics*, p. 1.

⁹⁹ Bishop, ‘Western Mathematics’, p. 73.

anything' (p. 203). Her parents stop encouraging her to study, 'presuming that she was now safely in the care of the most prestigious academic institution' (p. 202). While her tutor, Mr Mountford, is pleased to have her because she is a 'positive acquisition for the university' and he does not want to risk the embarrassment of her failing (p. 207). His remark about Rumi being an 'acquisition' is rather dehumanising language and it shows how Rumi is thought of as a commodity and denied individuality. This remark brings to mind Nikesh Shukla argument about the 'good immigrant',¹⁰⁰ and how immigrants are always expected to work hard and keep quiet so they can earn the right to be in Britain: 'Integrate well. Move upwards in society. Be praised – until people [...] remember that you're foreign'.¹⁰¹ Rumi's tutor's remark is a constant reminder that she will always occupy a conditional state where her belonging is questioned, and she needs to work to earn it.

The cultural struggle in the novel is further highlighted by all the reports and newspaper articles after Rumi's escape that accused her parents of using their 'fiercely trained child as a weapon to subvert the free-thinking traditions of the West' (p. 269). The description of Rumi as 'a weapon' intentionally used to disrupt Western tradition, deprives her of an individual identity or a right to belong and stress her status as an outsider. However, the struggle to belong will never end as observed by Reni Eddo-Lodge, 'To be an immigrant, good or bad, is about straddling two homes, whilst knowing you don't really belong to either.'¹⁰² It is this state of in-betweenness and the inability to fully belong that causes Rumi to decide to leave everything behind, her family home, Oxford, mathematics, and even Cardiff. In the final analysis, education in Lalwani's *Gifted* is culturally charged; reading it alongside India's colonial and postcolonial history provides useful insights and a better understanding of the events and the characters' struggles. It also provides a new way of conceptualizing immigrants struggles to belong to Britain in the 2000s.

¹⁰⁰ Nikesh Shukla, ed., *The Good Immigrant* (London: Unbound, 2016).

¹⁰¹ Wei Ming Kam, 'Beyond "Good" Immigrants', in *The Good Immigrant*, ed. by Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2016), pp. 84–95 (p. 86).

¹⁰² Reni Eddo-Lodge, 'Forming Blackness Through A Screen', in *The Good Immigrant*, ed. by Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2016), pp. 77–83 (p. 83).

Cardiff and the Representation of Multicultural Britain in the 1980s

As shown in the previous section, Lalwani's exploration of education is tied to her precise mapping of different parts of Britain. When in Oxford, Rumi is able to explore her identity more freely and learn how to be both South Asian and British. On her first day in Oxford, she decides to 'slice off the excess length' (p. 191) of her skirt, taking more control over how she expresses her identity and her sense of belonging and thus feeling more connected to the British culture. This act also demonstrates how material culture is used by ethnic minorities in Britain to assert a sense of identity and belonging. Rumi also goes to the Jazz and Samosas Night (p. 210) organised by the Asian Society, where she can 'slip in, aimless and friendless, without fear of ridicule' (p. 213), in a sense she feels connected to those unknown people because they share her cultural heritage. The depiction of Oxford as a multicultural place proves that when Rumi is away from the pressure of her family, the performance of identity becomes a matter of choice for her rather than an outcome of fear or pressure. However, since such freedom was not offered to her in Cardiff her struggle to create a landscape of belonging (in Britain and in Wales) becomes more apparent.

As mentioned above, *Gifted* was written in the 2000s and is set in Cardiff in the 1980s. The setting of the novel draws attention to ideas of inclusion and exclusion in multicultural Britain in the 1980s, a critical period in postcolonial writings where much emphasis was placed on 'questions of identity, sexuality, interracial romance, and race'.¹⁰³ The novel memorably describes 'a fragmented or bordered Britain where ethnic strongholds are stated and reinstated, typically to the detriment of individual existences',¹⁰⁴ which can be seen in Rumi's confusion, isolation and her inability to fully integrate into the British society. This section will discuss the setting of the novel and how it is connected to my overarching arguments, especially given the thesis's focus on representations of cultural identity, ethnicity, and belonging in locations other than London. I will investigate how the setting of *Gifted* in Cardiff in the 1980s complicates discussions about multicultural Britain in a post-devolutionary period. The novel's setting in Cardiff will be discussed in relation to

¹⁰³ Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Ulla Rahbek, *British Multicultural Literature and Superdiversity* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 131.

national belonging, with particular attention to how it is expressed through language, sport, and material culture.

The setting of the novel plays an important role in how the characters' identities develop. Many scholars see post-colonial writing as 'concerned with spaces, landscapes and journeys', especially spaces that include movement between multiple 'homes' and points of identification.¹⁰⁵ In *Gifted*, the city is experienced by the characters as the site of a complex identity struggle and transnational experience. It constructs what Henri Lefebvre calls a 'Representational space' that is conceived as both 'real' and 'imagined' through the 'lived' and 'narrated' lives of the people.¹⁰⁶ This section explores the difference between 'inside spaces' and 'outside spaces' in the novel. It will build on various theoretical frameworks that conceptualise urban space to develop an understanding of the concepts of home and nation.

Generally, it can be noticed that the depiction of urban space in the novel is often reduced to closed windows and cold rooms that seem to hinder Rumi's journey of self exploration and her search for belonging. Throughout the novel, Rumi is often seen looking out of a window to the outside world while shivering in an inside space (pp. 18, 35, 58, 110, 119, 136, 184, 198). The glass of the windows mimics the restrictions placed on her by her parents, as both of them prevent her from reaching the outside world and having the freedom to explore. But although windows 'enact separation' they can also 'promise integration'.¹⁰⁷ Anna Woodhouse explains that windows represent the realities of a place on the other side and images of windows 'address questions of identity' and can be used to 'negotiate the characters' relations to their society'.¹⁰⁸ For Rumi windows act as a link that connects her to Cardiff and present the promise of integration into the Welsh community. Whenever Rumi feels sad, scared, or frustrated she looks out of the window at her own reflection mixed with the streets of Cardiff 'watching rain droplets slide into each other' (p.

¹⁰⁵ Pramod Nayar, 'The Transnational Indian Novel in English', in *Imagined Identities: Identity Formation in the Age of Globalisation*, ed. by Gonul Pultar (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 17–32 (p. 18).

¹⁰⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 39–42.

¹⁰⁷ Anna Woodhouse, 'The Woolrichian Window and the Democratization of the Detective in "Rear Window"', *Comparative American Studies*, 11.4 (2013), 387–403 (p. 390).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 388–89.

18) and imagines a different reality for herself. These fragmented and distorted reflections in the window conjure Rushdie's 'broken mirror' and Du Bois conceptualization of 'double consciousness'. Rumi's attempts to forge an identity between two cultures are like dealing with broken mirrors that never give a full reflection, the window highlights the tension between external perception and internal struggle and further complicates her connection to Cardiff and Wales.

Cardiff is central in Rumi's negotiation of her identity and her transnational experience, with its relentless rain and 'similar houses that stretched up the left of a hilly road, terracotta blocks, chequered with creamy beige sealant, and graphite-coloured roofs' (p. 12). In one of the rare occasions when Rumi is interacting with the city space, she is depicted making her way to 'the heart of Cardiff' through 'Queen Street station' (p. 97). The station, which is located at the eastern end of Cardiff city centre, is the gate to the city and an important part of its history. Peter Finch explains that the station, which was originally built of wood in 1840, is a testament to Cardiff's glorious history as the 'iron metropolis, coal capital of the world'.¹⁰⁹ By 'standing on the platform of Queen Street Station' (p. 97) Rumi experiences a part of the city's cultural history and forges a new complex, cosmopolitan identity. Rumi then makes her way to 'the built-up area and enter[s] the health-food shop in the Morgan arcade' (p. 97). The arcade, one of several in Cardiff city centre built during the nineteenth century, is a mark of the city's immense development, starting with the opening of St David's shopping centre in the 1980s.¹¹⁰ Cardiff's significance stems not only from being the capital of Wales since 1955, but also from the fact that it is a multicultural city that is home to a large percentage of different nationalities.¹¹¹ Rumi's rare interactions with Cardiff's city space help shape her sense of identity and build her connection to Wales.

Cardiff presents to Rumi the possibilities of an interconnected, dynamic, transnational experience. However, Rumi's experience of the city space is always hindered by her cultural isolation and sense of difference. In her interaction with the outside space, she often 'feel[s] useless' (p. 16), 'in danger of being noticed' (p. 15) and eyed like 'a

¹⁰⁹ Peter Finch, *Real Cardiff 2: The Greater City* (Bridgend: Seren, 2004), pp. 55–56.

¹¹⁰ Peter Finch, *Real Cardiff Three: The Changing City* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009), p. 46.

¹¹¹ Peter Finch, *Real Cardiff* (Bridgend: Seren, 2002), p. 11.

specimen under a microscope' (p. 148). These feelings resemble Lalwani's own account of the cultural isolation she felt in Cardiff during the 1980s and 1990s. It was the main reason why she tried so hard to connect with her Indian heritage, which led her to develop a wish to 'return for good' to India.¹¹² Knowledge of Lalwani's account of her experiences in Cardiff in the 1980s encourages a reading of the novel as charged with themes of racial and cultural difference. Generally, Cardiff city space is central in Rumi's experience, whether from behind the window or on the rare occasions she is allowed to wander in the city's streets. The city offers the potential for a transnational experience that can help Rumi overcome her cultural struggle and express her identity more freely.

Through its setting in the 1980s, the novel engages with issues of migration, racism, and national belonging that still had a strong hold on public consciousness in the 2000s. At the beginning of the novel, Mahesh is represented reading a note written by Rumi that describes an incident that happened to her. In the letter, Rumi mentions her friend saying that her mother does not like 'coloured people' (p. 3), which calls attention to a highly significant issue that dominated the social and political sphere of Britain in the 1980s and the discussion concerning national belonging in Britain. The term 'coloured people' reflects a sense of the prevailing biases and discriminatory attitudes during that period. The fact that it is mentioned at the beginning of the novel draws more attention to the complexities of identities and belonging to Britain. In the introduction to his book, *Landscape and Englishness*, David Matless discusses the concept of 'national identity', explaining that it is exceptionally difficult to define because it is strongly connected to the definitions of 'Other' and 'Self'.¹¹³ Matless's comments illuminate the difficulty of Rumi's position as both an 'insider' and 'outside' when it comes to belonging to Britain.

In the novel, the idea of the nation and national belonging is connected to movement and the body. Rumi's sense of 'Indianness' becomes stronger when she visits India for the first time when she is eight years old. This movement is presented as both inward and outward at the same time. It is inward in the sense that Rumi feels conditioned by her cultural surroundings, and she understands what it means to be accepted primarily because of a shared cultural heritage. This movement is also outward because, during the

¹¹² Lalwani, 'Postcard From India', p. 11.

¹¹³ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1998), p. 17.

trip, Rumi interacts with the external environment and experiences freedom of movement, a freedom she never experienced in Cardiff, mainly because of her father's patriarchal control. When Rumi visits India for the second time when she is fifteen, she is asked by her relatives, 'Are you Angrez or Indian?' to which Rumi answers 'both' (p. 166). This is the first time Rumi clearly identifies as British. In a sense, her geographical mobility enables her to connect more with her British identity. In addition, it speaks directly to what Paul Gilroy describes as 'the tension between roots and routes',¹¹⁴ as Rumi is constantly torn between her tangled identities: Indian, Welsh, and British.

Gifted speaks to the difference between British and Welsh identities through sport references, bridges, border crossings, and language. In the novel, Wales is presented primarily in terms of its geography. There is no direct reference to the Welsh language or to any other cultural attributes connected to Welsh identity. However, when Rumi plays in the chess tournament with her classmates, a reference is made to the 'Severn Bridge' where 'they curse the English and cheer for Wales' (p. 98). The reference to the bridge and to the sport cheers calls attention to Welsh nationalism and the boundaries between Englishness and Welshness, or notions of similarities and fragmentation that contribute to the making of a sense of Britishness, especially when it comes to cultural and linguistic borders.¹¹⁵ On the one hand, sport has always been associated with the expression of national identity, especially through the use of songs and cheers. As explained by Martin Johnes, 'songs and contests all make it a perfect vehicle through which collective ideas of nationhood can be expressed', and when it comes to the Welsh national identity, 'Sport glosses over the different meanings that the people of Wales attach to their nationality, enabling them to assert, maybe even understand, their Welshness in the face of internal division and the political, social and cultural shadow of England.'¹¹⁶ However, it cannot be neglected that sport has always helped in inducing negative responses towards immigrants, especially during the 1980s. Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj explains that during the 1980s 'Norman Tebbitt, a

¹¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 133.

¹¹⁵ See: Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture: New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), pp. 7–9.

¹¹⁶ Martin Johnes, "'Every Day when I Wake Up I Thank the Lord I'm Welsh': Sport and National Identity in Post-war Wales', in *Sport and National Identity in the Post-War World*, ed. by Dilwyn Porter and Adrian Smith (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), pp. 52–68 (p. 52).

conservative member of Parliament, publicly queried South Asian loyalty to the British nation, because these minorities did not cheer for the English teams in international cricket games against India and Pakistan'.¹¹⁷ Thus, the sport reference underlines cultural differences and struggle for Rumi.

On the other hand, bridges and border crossings entail a sense of change between nations and national belonging and thus recognise different points of identification. As Ulla Rahbek explains, 'borders connect as well as separate'.¹¹⁸ In this case, borders connect Englishness and Welshness under a multicultural British identity. However, the bridge can also indicate a border and difference between a Welsh national or cultural identity and a British 'state' or 'political' identity.¹¹⁹ Thus, Rumi's identity shifts and changes as she moves from one cultural setting to another. This understanding of identity speaks to Charlotte Williams's description of her own mixed-race identity in 'I Going Away, I Going Home', where she explains that for her, identity is connected to movement rather than 'any singular or static statement of being'.¹²⁰

Furthermore, the depiction of Oxford as a place to achieve freedom and public recognition for Rumi, or 'the first gate' where 'she would be free' (p. 147), entails a movement outwards, away from both the Indian and Welsh cultures into a more multicultural British identity. This identity reflects a sense of belonging that extends beyond the confines of a single place and encompasses the possibility of feeling at home in multiple places or even in no place at all. Again, the shift from one national identity to another is associated with Rumi's changing location and movement and further complicates her cultural and identity struggle.

In addition, the crossing of the bridge presents an understanding of Wales as a point of identification for Rumi through sport cheers and thus represents her transnational identity. But, belonging to a 'home country' or multiple home countries is not something

¹¹⁷ Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj, *Where Are You From?: Middle-Class Migrants in the Modern World* (California: University of California Press, 2003), p. 1.

¹¹⁸ Rahbek, *British Multicultural Literature*, p. 132.

¹¹⁹ Daniel John Evans, 'Welshness in "British Wales": Negotiating National Identity at the Margins', *Nations and Nationalism*, 25.1 (2019), 167–90 (p. 171).

¹²⁰ Charlotte Williams, "'I Going Away, I Going Home': Mixed- "Race" Movement, and Identity, in *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home and Belonging*, ed. by Lynne Pearce (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 179–95 (p. 179).

that can be easily achieved. Rumi is part of the South Asian community, and therefore, she is classified as 'other' when it comes to Welsh or British national identity, which is expressed through her mother's fear that 'her daughter would be rejected' and would become 'neither this [British] nor that [Indian], neither here [Britain] nor there [India]' (p. 47). This sense of 'otherness' leaves Rumi wondering 'what it would have been like if she had been born and brought up in her country of origin, a moving dot graduating through the comforting structures and hierarchies of "Mother India", as they referred to it in Hindi films' (p. 113). This example shows that Rumi feels under great pressure 'to deal not only with parental and community scripts but also with the British host script' and is thus unable to construct an identity that adheres to each of her points of identification, including Wales, India, and Britain.¹²¹

Furthermore, the term 'Mother India' recalls the metaphor of the motherland and its strong associations with nationalism. The term has deep connections to India's national identity and is strongly connected to India's complex political, religious, and cultural aspects that collide to construct the characters' sense of national belonging.¹²² Also, the allusion to the 'motherland' in such a context is strongly connected to the post-colonial conception of the British Empire. Specifically, in the mind of the colonised there was a 'spurious notion of England as a motherland for all who lived within the Empire', with the English language serving as their gateway to a multi-national identity.¹²³

However, the concept of the motherland is usually connected to a mother tongue, as losing the mother tongue contributes to the loss of belonging to the motherland.¹²⁴ Thus, language is a central component of national belonging. Rumi feels denied of her own culture of origin because she is not allowed to speak Hindi in the family house in Cardiff. The fact that she is forced to speak English relates to the use of the English language in the 'rhetoric of race', described by Pramod Nayar as disruptive yet also empowering, as the use of English

¹²¹ Ulla Rahbek, 'Dual Lives? Constructing Individuality in Contemporary British Multicultural Memoirs', in *Transculturation and Aesthetics: Ambivalence, Power, and Literature*, ed. by Joel Kuortti (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), pp. 65–84 (p. 68).

¹²² See: Ranjana Ash, 'The Search for freedom in Indian Women's Writing', in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: The Women's Press, 1991), pp. 152–74.

¹²³ Fido, 'Mother/lands', p. 335.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 334.

can result in cultural contestation and the unsettling of social norms.¹²⁵ These cultural struggles usually occur between first- and second-generation immigrants, as each group's sense of belonging is connected to a different language. This struggle can be seen clearly in the relationship between Rumi and her mother, as Shreene prefers to express herself in Hindi, a language Rumi cannot understand. Shreene describes this situation in the novel, 'but not a word Rumi would understand. The communication gap caused [her] an almost physical pain when she thought of it' (p. 45). Therefore, language acts as a barrier that prevents their cultural negotiation and enhances Rumi's sense of disconnection from her ancestral motherland.

Moreover, when taking the setting of the novel into account, the same idea can be applied to the Welsh language. The question of language is central to Welsh literature as evident in multiple critical works on the subject. Raymond Williams argues that language will continue to be central to cultural identity and that the loss and marginalization of the Welsh language as a result of the actions taken by the English will always be unforgivable: 'The central continuity is of course the language, and this remains critical to cultural identity not only in those who have retained or are re-acquiring it, but even in many of those for whom it is now lost or marginal'.¹²⁶ Rumi's story, being located in Cardiff, brings to mind this argument and might be read in parallel to it. Lalwani hints at Williams's argument in two scenes in the novel; when Whitefoot decides to mock Mahesh, using a Welsh accent, for wanting his daughter to adhere to the Indian culture and traditions, while not doing so himself, 'He [Whitefoot] feigned a Welsh accent, 'Got yew a homespun *Loongi* on underneath, have yew?' (p. 127), and when Rumi went out with Fareed for the first time in Oxford and he 'mimicked her Welsh accent' (p. 221). The mention of the Welsh language in an intense conversation about Indian culture struggle between Whitefoot and Mahesh and in Blenheim Palace by Fareed, establishes a basis for such comparison. Both the Hindi language and the Welsh language are replaced with English as the language of cultural identity and belonging, and this replacement is culturally unsettling. The submerging of Welsh and Hindi within the text introduces additional layers of cultural and linguistic

¹²⁵ Nayar, 'The Transnational Indian Novel', p. 26.

¹²⁶ Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales: Nation, Culture, Identity*, ed. by Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales press, 2003), p. 19.

complexity and further complicates Rumi's transnational experience. In this way, locating the novel in Wales adds more depth to the issues of national belonging and transnational connections in *Gifted*.

Gifted's representation of a multicultural British identity can also be connected to Lalwani's representation of the family friend, Whitefoot. In his analysis of the novel, Kevin Mills notes that the name Whitefoot might have other implications: 'That Mahesh's friend/playmate is called "Whitefoot" reminds the reader of colour difference'.¹²⁷ I will base my analysis on a similar conception, suggesting that Whitefoot provides a link to the British culture, Rumi is exposed to. Although Mahesh prevents his family from socialising with anyone outside the family in fear that it will negatively affect Rumi's concentration, Whitefoot is the only person who is allowed to enter their enclosed domestic space. Bringing with him a more British way of looking at things, Whitefoot often criticises Mahesh's approach to Rumi's upbringing:

But what about being a normal teenager, man? [...] What about, you know, discovering how to vomit in a straight line on a starlit night after one too many bevvies down the local? [...] [D]yeing your hair green so you can get the attention of the kid who sits at the front in chemistry (p. 127).

Whitefoot enhances the novel's complexity with his criticism of Mahesh's way of thinking and adds some complexity to Rumi's experience.

It is through Whitefoot that Rumi reconsiders her relationship with her family at the end of the novel. Rumi meets Whitefoot at the Queen's Lane coffee house, just minutes before her penal exam at Oxford; as 'she looked at Whitefoot, and thought of everything: the penal Collection, a broken oven, Shreene's hurt face, a vacuum-cleaner pad, tears – Mahesh's uncried ones; wet and drugged eyes' (p. 259). During her conversation with Whitefoot he tells her that she should take 'some time to work out what matters to [her]' and do things that she has not been able to do at home (p. 261). Whitefoot also tells her about Brighton and describes it as a place where 'people who've decided to get back to being themselves' go to (p. 261). Once again, Whitefoot is depicted as a reminder of the

¹²⁷ Kevin Mills, 'Indian Defences: Mobile Identities in Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted*', in *Ex-sistere: Women's Mobility in Contemporary Irish, Welsh and Galician Literatures*, ed. by María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2016), pp. 190–205 (p. 193).

tensions between her Indian heritage and her British place of belonging. It is through her conversation with Whitefoot that Rumi realises that Britain has much more to offer. Although she does not feel accepted in Cardiff or Oxford, she realises that it is possible to find another place where she can achieve self-realisation and belonging.

Furthermore, the notion of 'colour difference', which Mills calls attention to above, seems constantly present in Rumi's interaction with the landscape. As she interacts with various spaces and places in different parts of Britain, Rumi seems constantly aware of her ethnic difference. Whether in Cardiff, Oxford or even during her short visit to Marlborough, Rumi displays signs of displacement and seems to feel discomfited. Her uneasiness reflects the exclusionary British culture described by Salman Rushdie in his 1982 essay 'The New Empire within Britain': 'Britain is now two entirely different worlds and the one you inherit is determined by the colour of your skin'.¹²⁸ Rumi's awareness of the colour of her skin is apparent in different situations throughout the novel. For instance, she repeatedly describes her school friend, Bridgemen, as 'creamed coconut'; 'his face is pure cream' (pp. 98, 100). In Oxford, even though Rumi is alive to her environment and the freedom associated with it she is still very much aware of cultural differences. She notices that the man who addresses her has a 'milky face' (p. 195), which is an indication of her self-awareness and unstable sense of belonging. When the man calls out her name, she suddenly feels a 'familiar' sensation: 'it was shame' (p. 195). Arguably, a name is not just a label for identification, but it also contains multiple connotations that can signify 'shame', including the name's connection to the country of origin, heritage or identity. Rumi's feeling of shame might be because she wants to create a new identity for herself in Oxford and no longer wants to be so closely connected to her cultural heritage.

Even when Rumi has an argument with her mother, Shreene keeps referencing the cultural practices of '[w]hite people' (p. 81) in contrast to her Indian heritage. In addition, Shreene regularly undermines Rumi's way of thinking and accuses her of 'changing colour' (p. 137). Also, the brief mention of Blenheim Palace (p. 221), when Rumi and Fareed decide to climb the fence that surrounds the Palace during their first night out together, brings these issues back into mind, given the importance of the country house to idealised notions

¹²⁸ Salman Rushdie, 'The New Empire within Britain', *New Society*, 62.1047 (1982), 417–21 (p. 417).

of Britishness and the connection with Winston Churchill's family. Churchill is associated with phrases such as 'I hate Indians' and 'keep Britain White'.¹²⁹ Skin colour is associated with cultural exclusion and the struggle to belong in Britain. Thus, *Gifted* touches on the complex interplay between national and cultural identity, geographical places, colonial histories, and belonging.

The struggle to negotiate the cultural space of Britain, the shifting sense of belonging, and the attempt to cope with the effects of colonialism are also mediated through the depiction of material culture in the novel. As mentioned previously, material culture is often used by South Asian immigrants to 'secure a sense of being and belonging within Britain',¹³⁰ and to assert their cultural identity. However, material culture also causes a sense of tension and alienation. Images relating to the associations between material culture and sense of national belonging are presented throughout the novel. For instance, Mahesh's chess board is presented as a 'superfluous possession that Mahesh had carried with him when he first travelled to Cardiff. He was proud of his honourable battalions, deeply Indian in design and scent' (p. 62). In a sense, through the chessboard and its reminders of India Mahesh uses material culture to reshape his new home in Britain 'with memory of "other" spaces of being'.¹³¹

Rumi's clothing also serves as an example of the connection between material culture, identity, and belonging. The clothes her parents make her wear are presented as a source of 'embarrassment' and a reason why she is unable to be 'identical' to everyone else, to the point that 'it hurts' (p. 17). Rumi feels the tension created by these cultural signifiers, which makes her examine her place within the British culture. When her mother, meanwhile, is forced to wear more Western clothes to work, including 'satin blouses [...] from Marks & Spencer - tight knee-length pencil skirts', she felt that she 'barely recognized herself in the hall mirror' (p. 48). Additionally, when Rumi moves away from her family house in Cardiff to study at Oxford, her freedom to engage with British culture manifests itself through cultural signifiers. For instance, her habit of eating cumin is replaced by a new

¹²⁹ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 88.

¹³⁰ Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, 'Materializing Post-colonial Geographies: Examining the Textural Landscapes of Migration in the South Asian Home', *Geoforum*, 35.6 (2004), 675–88 (p. 675).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 676.

addiction to English chocolates and songs (p. 200). The fact that her obsession with music begins when she moves to Oxford supports the idea that cultural identity is connected to place and that music plays an important role in forming a notion of national belonging.¹³² Generally, material culture is used by Mahesh and Rumi to find a sense of belonging within the large narratives of different nations.

As mentioned in the chapter's introduction, Rumi's story of identity struggle and the search for belonging between Britain and India can be read as a Bildungsroman. Throughout the novel, Lalwani employs the Bildungsroman structure through themes, such as identity formation and cultural integration, that are central to Rumi's growth towards adulthood. Although the Bildungsroman is a literary form that dates to the eighteenth century, many modern writers have adapted it to explore social and cultural issues. Stella Bolaki explains that this new interest in the Bildungsroman usually came from 'marginalized subjects', such as women and ethnic minorities.¹³³ Elleke Boehmer supports this claim by explaining that postcolonial women writers usually use the Bildungsroman to defy conventional family narratives by shifting attention to the character of the daughter: 'They [postcolonial women writers] have dramatised her [the daughter's] negotiated bid for selfhood and status within what might be called the national house, that is, within the inherited and correlated structures of both family and nation-state'.¹³⁴ This description clearly applies to Lalwani's representation of Rumi's struggle: the family house is depicted as an imprisoning space and Rumi is motivated by finding a way to live away from the cultural pressures constituted by her family. In a sense, Rumi's story is an ethnic Bildungsroman, in which the female character grows up in Britain excluded from the feeling of national belonging, which provides an in-depth account of her struggle with language and the religious and sexual constraints of her parents' cultural beliefs.

However, in tackling this form, Lalwani takes a slightly different approach to the Bildungsroman compared to other British Asian female writers, such as Monica Ali and Meera Syal. Unlike Rumi, the female protagonists in Ali's *Brick Lane* (2004) and Syal's *Anita*

¹³² Ian D. Biddle, and Vanessa Knights, *Music, National Identity and the Politics of Location Between the Global and the Local* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 5.

¹³³ Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman*, p. 11.

¹³⁴ Boehmer, *Stories of Women*, p. 107.

and Me (1996)¹³⁵ achieve their dreams of assimilation and integration into British society. They are only able to do this through ‘fashioning’ their separate identities away from the novels’ controlling male figures.¹³⁶ Even though *Brick Lane*’s Nazneen comes to Britain after reaching adulthood, many critics have considered her story to be a ‘multi-cultural Bildungsroman’. For instance, Michael Perfect argues that Nazneen’s ability to achieve selfhood and ‘her final integration into a multicultural British society’ is what makes the novel a multicultural Bildungsroman.¹³⁷ Nadia Valman adopts a similar interpretation, explaining that Nazneen’s ability to achieve autonomy and self-respect ‘as a worker in contemporary multicultural London’ is what transforms the novel into a ‘realist Bildungsroman’.¹³⁸ Thus, Ali uses the themes of language, mobility, and employment as a means of empowering her character and enabling her to achieve her final triumph against patriarchy and oppression, whereas Lalwani’s treatment of similar themes is different. In *Gifted*, language, movement, and education cause Rumi more confusion regarding her identity and exacerbate her sense of cultural exclusion.

By contrast, Meena Kumar, the nine-year-old British-Indian in Syal’s *Anita and Me*, struggles with identity in a way that is similar to Rumi. Both Meena and Rumi try to voice their identities through generational, religious, cultural, and linguistic conflicts while simultaneously attempting to navigate their way through Britain’s public spaces. In these novels, the maturation process of the protagonists is presented through tensions between their families’ ethnic traditions and their dreams of assimilating into British society, as Britain is their home. However, the genre of the Bildungsroman traditionally denotes a fulfilment of such dreams and the ‘awakening’ of the young protagonists as they attain their sense of self.¹³⁹ By using this genre, Lalwani and Syal are expected to illustrate such self-fulfilment, allowing their characters to integrate into multicultural Britain. Syal seems to fulfil this expectation at the conclusion of *Anita and Me*. Sara Upstone interprets the novel’s ending as ‘a movement from a position of naivety to enlightenment, as Meena develops and

¹³⁵ Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* (London: Flamingo, 1997).

¹³⁶ Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman*, p. 20.

¹³⁷ Michael Perfect, ‘The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43.3 (2008), 109–20 (p. 110).

¹³⁸ Nadia Valman, ‘The East End Bildungsroman from Israel Zangwill to Monica Ali’, *Wasafiri*, 24.1 (2009), 3–8 (pp. 3–5).

¹³⁹ Mélissa Gélinas, ‘Contemporary Narratives of *Bildung*: New Directions’, *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 73.3 (2019), 137–41 (p. 138).

comes to terms with her own complex cultural positioning'.¹⁴⁰ Lalwani, however, chooses to traverse a different path, refusing to disclose the ending of Rumi's story. Though Rumi's final decision to escape to Brighton might be seen as an assertion of her individuality, it is not clear whether this decision helps her achieve a sense of belonging or not, which in James Procter's words 'highlight[s] widening discrepancies across Britain's supposed homogenous national landscape'.¹⁴¹

Any understanding of the British national landscape and cultural setting in the novel would not be complete without comparing it to other landscapes of belonging in similar novels. To fully explore the significance of setting *Gifted* in Cardiff, I will compare it to another famous novel located in London: *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (2003). My discussion of London is based on the critical viewpoints expressed in John Clement Ball's *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (2004)¹⁴² and John McLeod's *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004).¹⁴³ Both present London as a multicultural metropolis that forms a link between the colonised and the coloniser. To some extent, the landscape of Cardiff presented in Lalwani's novel adheres to Clement Ball's description of London as

a place where personal and collective identity can be productively interrogated. The individual's link to larger entities and phenomena – geographical, historical, national, ethnic/racial – are brought into focus by London's role as central node in a (post) imperial network that sprawls messily across time and space. Through the recurring motifs of microcosmic worlds, oceans, twilight, houses, perception, and of the real or imagined journeys that seem to collapse the boundaries of time and space.¹⁴⁴

Cardiff, much like Clement Ball's London, is a place that is rich with culture and heritage, which introduces an opportunity for the characters to interact with its diverse landscape and enhance their cultural experience, whether positively or negatively. Positive associations include a sense of recognition and acceptance, while negative associations involve alienation and rejection. The fact that Wales is a bilingual country makes it a more

¹⁴⁰ Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 122.

¹⁴¹ Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 3.

¹⁴² John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

¹⁴³ John McLeod, *Postcolonial London Rewriting the Metropolis* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

¹⁴⁴ Clement Ball, pp. 172–73.

complex site of identity negotiation and resistance against cultural boundaries and enhances transnational experiences. Thus, the city and the aesthetic and cultural experience of urban space are transformed into a means of negotiating identity and cultural belonging.

Lalwani's representation of space in *Gifted* aligns with Ali's depiction of London's Brick Lane as a space that is culturally isolated from the rest of London. Thus, both spaces restrict how the identities of the novels' characters develop, primarily because the characters seem to minimise their interactions with the cultural spaces within the cities, Cardiff and London. In *Brick Lane*, the characters 'don't ever really leave home. Their bodies are here [in London] but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live; just recreating the villages here'.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, in *Gifted*, Rumi is rarely allowed to leave the house and venture into the city streets. She is constantly surrounded by artefacts and reminders of her Indian heritage, which make her wish to go 'back to where [she] came from' (p. 24).

In both novels, the father figures – Chanu in *Brick Lane* and Mahesh in *Gifted* – are depicted as static and controlling. Both of them spend more than half their lives in London and Cardiff, respectively, but hardly leave their houses to interact with their cultural surroundings. Their notion of city space is purely geographical and thus lacks the social component of space identified by Doreen Massey.¹⁴⁶ Whenever they are outside of their homes, they feel out of place. Take, for example, the scene in *Gifted* where Mahesh goes to the pub with his friend Whitefoot: '[Mahesh] felt small, uncultivated somehow, shrunken' (p. 124). Moreover, both Mahesh and Chanu seem to fixate on the past and want their daughters to remember and take pride in their countries of origins, which draws attention to second-generation immigrants' experience with cultural space and the pressure they feel to identify with their ancestral culture rather than having the freedom to experience their 'home' country in Britain.

London and Cardiff's multiculturalism is created by the presence of immigrants from different formerly colonized countries, as both McLeod and Clement Ball explain. Yet it is those settlers who experience discrimination and alienation when strolling on the city streets.¹⁴⁷ Glimpses of such alienation can be seen in both novels. Firstly, towards the

¹⁴⁵ Ali, p. 32.

¹⁴⁶ Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

¹⁴⁷ McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, p. 4.

beginning of *Gifted*, Shreene is shown walking in Cardiff with seven-year-old Rumi. In the scene, Shreene inscribes the city streets with her own associations: 'the warmth, the rain and the moon' cause her to remember the home she left behind and influence her ability to assimilate and interact with the city. Her emotions force her into a 'telephone box', another confined space that limits her mobility, and even when she tries to make a call to connect with her family back in India, she realises that she does not have enough money and thus she is left feeling more agony and helplessness. (p. 43). At the same time Shreene is depicted as feeling alienated by the city space, sensing the danger of walking 'these run-down streets' (p. 42). Secondly, in *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's first encounter with the London city space leaves her feeling as though she is '[w]ithout a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leaf shake of fear – or was it excitement? – passed through her legs'.¹⁴⁸ Both Shreene and Nazneen appear to feel lost and out of context in the city space. The boundaries between the home and the outside world or between the private and the public can cause disorientation and therefore enhance one's sense of displacement.¹⁴⁹

However, near the end of the novel, Shreene develops a different perspective of her surroundings in Cardiff. She describes the family house in Cardiff as a 'square of concrete and soil their own still appealed with its quaint notion of privacy. The centrepiece, a large willow tree that brushed right up against the fence, had almost spiritual quality, as though it was a guardian for her family' (p. 122). It is only through urban space that Shreene finally feels grounded and rooted in a British landscape. At this moment, the British setting is no longer a space of alienation but is transformed into something familiar and connected to her life. The fact that she described the soil as 'their own' speaks directly to her sense of belonging.

Throughout the novel, Rumi struggles to create a meaningful connection with both Indian and British cultural settings. At the very end of *Gifted*, we witness Rumi's realisation that her attempts are not successful:

[t]his is not [her] life. The words gathered a hectic momentum, blurring in her head like the lines on a spinning top. She wasn't going to do this exam. She

¹⁴⁸ Ali, p. 56.

¹⁴⁹ Bhabha, p. 13.

wasn't going to put her hand inside her tights and pray to find the answers, she was not going to beg for the intervention of God in this blind raffle of notes about her body' (p. 264).

This passage reflects Rumi's sense of exclusion. It is notable that her body is presented as a scene of stigmatisation, as if inscribed with a cultural baggage that she wishes to get rid of. This cultural baggage leads her to leave Cardiff and rewrite her own story in a city of her choice. Her body is configured as 'a border site' of the struggle between different cultures and identities.¹⁵⁰ In this moment of self-realisation Rumi is determined to no longer be attached to either religion or education. Religion seems to represent her Indian cultural heritage, while learning and mathematics represent British culture. The reasoning for connecting 'God' to her Indian culture is that, throughout the novel whenever Rumi does anything that goes against her parents' cultural conventions, like inviting her friends to the family house (p. 88) or having a relationship with a Muslim boy (p. 244), she is forced to pray and ask for the God's forgiveness. So religious faith is always connected to being a good Indian, while being successful, getting good grades, and joining Oxford is her gateway to recognition from the British culture as declared by her father multiple times in the novel.

Gifted therefore describes the process of framing and reframing the body through certain restrictions, such as religious beliefs and educational institutions. Rumi's final decision to escape can be seen as her attempt to unbind herself from both Indian and British national identities in order to create 'a new landscape of stability'.¹⁵¹ The fact that Rumi chooses to move to a seaside city, a landscape characterised by change and shifting tides, highlights the difficulties of belonging and contrasts any optimistic image of either homogenous or multicultural Britain.

¹⁵⁰ Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 69.

¹⁵¹ Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, 'Mobility/stability: British Asian cultures of "landscape and Englishness"', *Environment and Planning*, 38.2 (2006) 341–58 (p. 351).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that *Gifted* offers an interesting version of British multiculturalism in the 2000s, due to its setting in Cardiff, Wales and its engagement with different geographical spaces, language, and education. I have shown that, Rumi's unresolved identity struggle and her never ending search for belonging, contradicts any notions of the ease of assimilation to Britain presented in some popular work by Asian and Black British women writers in the turn of the millennium. The ending of Ali's *Brick Lane*, with Nazneen ice skating in a sari,¹⁵² and the image of Alsana, Clara, and Neena exchanging 'PG tips [...] without milk, with lemon' and 'crumbly Indian sweets'¹⁵³ setting on a park bench in London in Smith's *White Teeth* are examples of such trends.

In this chapter, I challenged any preconceived notions of Cardiff as a passive location within the novel. I have argued that while *Gifted* presents a sense of fragmented Britain and the struggle to belong between different cultures, the depiction of Cardiff offers a hopeful vision of transnational connections that can foster the creation of new identities and facilitate belonging to multiple homes. I have explained that Lalwani underscores the challenges of belonging by deliberately submerging any representation of Welsh identity or Welsh language within the novel's form and subject matter. Rumi's inability to fully engage with Cardiff and the Welsh culture, due to the restrictions placed by her parents hinders her identity development and her search for belonging. This is made more prominent through a comparison with Hindi and Shreene's frustration that she is unable to use her mother tongue to express her identity and communicate with her daughter. The discussion stresses the importance of language and locations in fostering a sense of national belonging.

My examination of home and national belonging in *Gifted*, demonstrates that these concepts intertwine space, language, sports, material culture, and food to create rich identities and a complicated sense of belonging. This theorization accords to what Jeanne Moore calls a 'holistic entity comprising of inter-related qualities of people, environment and time',¹⁵⁴ and these qualities are constantly changing and gaining new meanings for

¹⁵² Ali, p. 492.

¹⁵³ Smith, *White Teeth*, p. 74.

¹⁵⁴ Jeanne Moore, 'Placing *Home* in Context', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 20.3 (2000) 207–17 (p. 213).

immigrants as they move through different cultural spaces. The way the novel depicts these cultural spaces and immigrant struggle in Britain is far from polished and rather highlights the difficulties and discrepancies that made belonging difficult and challenging.

Home in *Gifted* is presented as a site of conflict and complicated identity struggle. It is only through movement that Rumi is able to reconstruct a sense of identity and reevaluate her relationship with home. That formulation of home accords with Doreen Massey's conceptualization of space, as not entirely independent but rather constantly connected to time and social relations.¹⁵⁵ Rumi's social relation with both her ancestral homeland and British society are an inevitable part of the experience and they help to shape a sense of self and belonging or non-belonging to a certain nation. Pramod K. Nayar argues that belonging is 'a sentimental attachment to territory or space' and whenever this 'space changes, the sense of belonging (or non-belonging) also changes,'¹⁵⁶ a definition that can be applied to Rumi's story.

However, it must be acknowledged that 'in an increasingly interconnected world, cultures are increasingly intertwined, and people often constitute their cultural identities by drawing on more than one culture',¹⁵⁷ which makes the process of identity formation extremely difficult. The problem with cultural identity, as explained by Olga Sezneva, is that it is not only the matter of self-identification with a particular culture but also the difficulty of dealing with a culture that is 'imposed from above or by powerful outsiders'.¹⁵⁸ For Rumi it is the pressure imposed by her parents who insist that she obey their rules and follow their cultural restrictions and also by her school friends who make her more aware of her cultural difference.

Not only that but education itself becomes an inescapable part of this cultural struggle. Children of immigrants, like Rumi, often find themselves in a constant intergenerational struggle with their parents, as they are exposed to the British culture through education. Children often strive to construct an individual identity that combines

¹⁵⁵ Massey, p. 2.

¹⁵⁶ Nayar, *Postcolonialism*, pp. 144–46.

¹⁵⁷ Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff, eds., *Transnational English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009), p. xii.

¹⁵⁸ Olga Sezneva, 'Ethnicity Theory for Migration Research', in *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. by Immanuel Ness (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), p. 2.

the different cultural components they are exposed to. In this chapter I explored this articulation of identity through Rumi's story while focusing on the specific connection to space and concepts of Welsh, Indian, and British national identities. *Gifted's* departure from the expected ending encourages a reflection on social, cultural, and ethnical changes at the turn of the millennium. It urges the embrace of ambiguity and engagement with the complexities of identity and belonging.

Brexit Postscript: Immigration, Belonging, and Identity in Lalwani's *You People*

In 2020, Nikita Lalwani published her third novel, *You People*,¹⁵⁹ a powerful narrative that explores immigration, belonging, and the struggles of undocumented refugees in contemporary Britain. Set in 2003, the novel takes place in Pizzeria Vesuvio, a small restaurant in South-West London that serves as a hub for diverse migrant communities. Lalwani's engagement with multiculturalism and belonging is reflected in the way she situates the restaurant in a street populated by a variety of ethnic businesses, including a 'Greek barber's shop', a 'Persian grocer', and a 'Pakistani butcher' (pp. 56, 69).

At the heart of the novel is Tuli, a Sri Lankan immigrant described by Nia, early in the novel, as a 'citizen of the world' (p. 62), because she perceives him as easy-going, well-liked by everyone, and always dressed in black 'smart' clothes. This phrase, however, stands in contrast to Theresa May's infamous speech to the Conservative party in 2016, in which she celebrated Brexit and stated that 'If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word "citizenship" means'.¹⁶⁰ By invoking this political rhetoric, Lalwani subtly critiques the exclusionary nationalism that shaped Britain's post-Brexit landscape, drawing attention to the paradox of a nation that strongly relies on migrants while rejecting them at the same time.

¹⁵⁹ Nikita Lalwani. *You People* (London: Penguin, 2020).

¹⁶⁰ 'Theresa May's Conference Speech in Full', *Daily Telegraph*, 05 October 2016 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/>> [accessed 04 August 2024].

Tuli provides food, employment, and support for undocumented migrants. His establishment becomes a microcosm of the hidden networks that sustain marginalized communities in London, where people find themselves intertwined in the complexities of legal status, survival, and creating new identities. Lalwani explains in an interview with *Lost City Books* that the novel is ‘partly modelled on a real place in South London [...] populated by immigrants both legal and those considered illegal’ where people go to seek help and advice.¹⁶¹ The restaurant becomes ‘a safe house’ that ‘exist[s] with the aim of protection rather than incarceration’ (p. 46).

The novel is presented through two distinct yet interwoven perspectives of two people simply trying to save themselves. The first is that of Nia, a 19-year-old Welsh-Bengali woman from Newport who escapes her abusive, drug addicted mother. The second is Shan, a Tamil refugee from Sri Lanka who came to Britain illegally to flee the civil war in his country, leaving his wife and son behind. Through these characters, Lalwani explores displacement, belonging, and the human cost of immigration policies in Britain, portraying the risky existence of those who live illegally in London. While *You People* addresses many of the post-Brexit anxieties surrounding immigration, it—like her earlier novel *Gifted*—did not receive extensive critical or public attention.¹⁶² This raises questions about race, national affiliation, and the commercial appeal of narratives that challenge dominant cultural and political discourses.

Immigration was one of the defining issues of the Brexit referendum, with the Leave campaign using anti-migrant rhetoric to fuel concerns around cultural loss and economic instability. As Kristian Shaw notes, the referendum ‘was the manifestation of over three decades of Euroscepticism, resistance to mass migration from Eastern Europe and the Middle

¹⁶¹ Nikita Lalwani interview with *Lost City Books*, 9 June 2021, available at:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=interview+with+Nikita+Lalwani&aq=interview+with+Nikita+Lalwani&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigATIHCAIQIRiPAjIHCAMQIRiPAtiBCTE5Mjc2ajFqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:f6669456,vid:1oYi66vJFnc,st:0> [accessed 28 February 2025].

¹⁶² The novel only received a few reviews in *The Guardian*, *FT.com*, and *The Economist*: Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, ‘*You People* by Nikita Lalwani Review – the Limits of Compassion’, *The Guardian*, 1 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/01/you-people-by-nikita-lalwani-review-the-limits-of-compassion> ; Kesewa Hennessy, ‘*You People* — Life among Britain’s Marginalised Workers’, *FT.Com*, 5 June 2020< <https://www.ft.com/content/ecdb13f6-a18b-11ea-94c2-0526869b56b0>> ; “*You People*” Dramatises the Underside of London’, *The Economist*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2020/04/08/you-people-dramatises-the-underside-of-london> .

East, [and] impotent rage regarding the Eurozone crisis'.¹⁶³ *You People* engages directly with these anxieties by depicting how Britain's shifting immigration policies affect individuals caught between legality and exclusion.

Most of these anxieties are explored through Shan. His story represents the unseen victims of the UK's immigration system, where bureaucratic obstacles and legal uncertainties determine who is allowed to stay and who is forced to leave. His story resonates with broader Brexit-era fears, as Shaw argues that 'immigration was widely heralded as the most critical factor for undecided voters' and Leave campaigners 'insinuated that borders should operate asymmetrically—permitting the flow of transnational goods and services, while blocking the passage of demonized "others"'.¹⁶⁴ However, Lalwani counteracts these fears by framing Shan's motivation for moving to the UK not in economic terms, but in his underlying desire for autonomy, encapsulated in his longing for a 'feeling of ownership over his own movements' (p. 197).

Lalwani deepens her critique of the narrow conceptions of belonging in Britain by exploring how language shapes identity and self-perception. Nia, like Rumi in *Gifted*, feels trapped in her particular situation and her identity struggle is visualized through her interaction with the mirror that is 'cracked' with her 'own failure' (p. 36). Nia also leaves Wales, Newport, to go to Oxford University where her own sense of cultural difference prompts her to develop 'a new voice [...] shorn of the Welsh wool [...] she remembered wearing those new vowels furs, feeling that showy and ridiculous' (p. 38). Similar to Rumi, Nia is torn between different identities and feels forced to hide her authentic self to fit in Oxford. In both novels, Lalwani disturbs narratives of national belonging and questions ideas around the fixity of identity by exploring how her protagonists position themselves against the dominant culture.

Britain's internal divisions are highlighted through references to movement, as seen in Nia's journey 'crossing the Severn bridge' (p. 166), symbolizing the negotiation of multiple identities. The contingency of Nia's identity is further emphasised through contrasting interpretations of her Britishness. For instance, she is interrogated by immigration

¹⁶³ Kristian Shaw, *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 167.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 142.

enforcement because she 'look[s] Colombian' (p. 167), while at the same time she is often told by non-British staff at the restaurant: 'You're British and white at that, you carry a certain legitimacy' (p. 134). The novel also exposes the racialized nature of Britishness, with characters labelled based on their ethnicity, such as 'Brit-born type' (p. 147) and 'white Brit girl' (p. 136). These distinctions reinforce the idea that some individuals are perceived as inherently belonging, while others must constantly prove their right to be here. Through these interactions, *You People* interrogates the notion of a fixed national identity, questioning who is allowed to claim Britishness and under what terms.

The novel depicts the difficult living and financial conditions faced by immigrants and illegal refugees in Britain, as well as their constant fear of being denied leave to remain or of facing deportation. Despite this bleak exploration of identity, belonging, and immigration in Britain, *You People* ultimately remains hopeful about the possibility of multiculturalism and coexistence in Britain. One of the most striking examples of such qualified optimism is found in the epilogue, where the woman who had previously lashed out at Shan on the bus, blaming migrants for the overcrowding of public services, returns to apologize. Earlier in the novel, this woman had directed her racialized frustration at Shan, shouting: 'Fuck you. Hospital is a fucking nightmare, I fucking waited for two hours. Because of you people. That's right – you people. Just fuck off home, stop looking at us.' (p. 192). At that moment, Shan does not respond with anger, but with frustration and quiet reflection, questioning the underlying reasons for such hostility: 'But I can live too. If I live, does it really mean you will die, lady? If my boy comes here, my small tiger cub, my baby son, does it mean that your sweet boy will die? What if my boy died there, lady, in my country? What then?' (p. 192).

By the end of the novel, the tension between them is resolved in a moment of shared humanity. The woman acknowledges her mistake, and they stand together, watching her child play, both smiling (p. 229). This quiet but powerful ending suggests that while prejudices and fears exist, humanity and compassion are never lost. Lalwani offers a vision of a Britain where understanding can emerge through human connection, challenging the notion that belonging must come at the expense of others.

Although *You People* has not received the critical attention it deserves, it remains a significant contribution to the literary landscape of post-Brexit Britain, particularly in relation to Welsh writing in English. As Hywel Rowland Dix argues, Welsh intellectuals and writers have

long sought to establish ‘diversity, cosmopolitanism, and interculturalism’ as defining aspects of Welsh culture.¹⁶⁵ He notes that these values have recently become a means of symbolically ‘challenging Brexit within Wales’,¹⁶⁶ countering the nationalist rhetoric that dominated much of the referendum debate. In this context, it is particularly striking that South Wales—not London—becomes the place of refuge for Shan as he searches for his wife and child (p. 185). This inversion challenges dominant assumptions about where multiculturalism thrives in Britain and aligns Wales with an alternative vision of inclusivity.

You People forces readers to confront the human cost of political decisions, asking uncomfortable but necessary questions about who gets to belong, who gets to be seen, and who is left invisible in the national conversation. In doing so, it offers a powerful counter-narrative to the exclusionary visions of British identity that dominated the Brexit debate.

By engaging with these questions, future research can further unpack the ways in which literature can help shape contemporary understandings of migration and Britishness especially in connection to the devolved nations. In considering the novel’s themes and reception, I hope this section serves as an invitation for further exploration into the literary and cultural consequences of Brexit, especially in connection to Wales and Welsh writings in English and the ongoing redefinition of British identity.

¹⁶⁵ Hywel Rowland Dix, ‘Constructions of Cosmopolitanism in the Making of Welsh Writing in English’, *International Journal of Welsh Writing in English*, 10.1 (2023), p. 2.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 2.

Chapter Two

The Complexity of Identity in Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road* (2010) and *Wish I Was Here* (2006)

Introduction

In this chapter, I will explore how Jackie Kay formulates a complex view of identity, while attempting to combat social injustices and question the limits of belonging and her relationship to Scotland. Specifically, I will focus on her autobiography/memoir, *Red Dust Road* (2010),¹ which traces Kay's search for her birth parents, and her collection of short stories *Wish I Was Here* (2006),² which represents characters dealing with loneliness, loss, and unstable relationships. Although the two works discussed in this chapter belong to different genres, both of them involve episodic journeys and boundary crossing.

In *Red Dust Road*, Kay presents her own journey as an adopted, mixed-race woman, between Scotland, England, and Nigeria. In *Wish I Was Here*, Kay narrates stories in which her characters are living in unspecified time or place, as if their lives fall outside social construction and expectations, which further complicates understanding of identity and national belonging. Most of the stories show the characters dealing with failed connections and a yearning to break free from their realities. Kay uses multiple voices, both in her memoir and her short story collection, in a way that allows each of her characters to express various fears, desires, and struggles. In these two works Kay utilizes sketches, images of mirror, foxes, fable and myth, and episodic structure to express the depth, complexity, and contradictions of formulating identity and a sense of belonging, especially in connection to Scotland.

In this chapter, I will investigate how Kay's depiction of an identifiable Scottish voice and Scottish places gives prominence to Scottishness and belonging both in her memoir and in her short story collection. My focus in this chapter is not Kay's depiction of the 'open-endedness of hybrid British identities', which Peter Clandfield has discussed in 'What is in

¹ Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road* (London: Picador, 2010).

² Jackie Kay, *Wish I Was Here* (London: Picador, 2006).

my Blood',³ but the more specific question of Black Scottish identities. Graeme Macdonald in 'Scottish Extractions, "Race" and Racism in Devolutionary Fiction' argues that 'Scottish writings are relatively late to matters of multiculturalism, including race and racism' and calls for the investigation of 'alternative model[s]' of Scottishness that are 'distinct from increasingly stale cultural modes of British multiculturalism'.⁴ In this chapter, I will examine how Kay's depiction of complex identities and her fight against racism and racial injustices formulate an 'alternative model' of Scottishness. Kay's work helps to shift the parameters of multiculturalism and Britishness in a post-devolutionary period.

In a book chapter entitled 'Speaking from Border Country: Colour as Fluid Identity Factor in the Short Stories of Jackie Kay', Barbara Korte argues that Kay's upbringing in Scotland 'far away from London and its emerging ethnic and cultural diversity' meant that her short story collections were less concerned with British multiculturalism, 'margins and exclusion'.⁵ Korte discusses Andrea Levy's story 'Loose Change' (2005), and Zadie Smith's 'The Embassy of Cambodia' (2013), as alternative examples of short stories that capture the 'multicultural spirit' of the British capital.⁶ I will contest this argument by showing that Kay's sense of isolation and marginalization growing up in Scotland fuels her writing and her fight against racism and social prejudices. I will show that Kay's writings move away from the presentation of a unified British culture depicted in the work of writers like Monica Ali, Zadie Smith, and Andrea Levy in the 2000s, into discussing national specific identities and the struggle to belong to Scotland. Building on Matthew Brown's argument that Scottish writers, like Kay, want readers 'to realise that the establishment of an independent parliament does not automatically remedy and resolve Scotland's internal divisions; rather it opens up challenging possibilities for the nation to recast its political and cultural contours on its own

³ Peter Clandfield, "'What Is In My Blood?': Contemporary Black Scottishness and the Work of Jackie Kay", in *Literature and Racial Ambiguity*, ed. by Teresa Hubel and Neil Brooks (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 95–108 (p. 19).

⁴ Graeme Macdonald, 'Scottish Extractions: "Race" and Racism in Devolutionary Fiction', *Orbis Litterarum*, 65.2 (2010), 79–107 (p. 82).

⁵ Barbara Korte, 'Speaking from Border Country: Colour as Fluid Identity Factor in the Short Stories of Jackie Kay', in *Gender and Short Fiction: Women's Tales in Contemporary Britain*, ed. by Jorge Sacido-Romero and Laura Lojo-Rodríguez (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 215–32 (p. 216).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

terms',⁷ I will show that Kay develops an idea of Scottishness that is more accommodating to racial difference.

When it comes to critical attention to Kay's work, there are not many critics, if any, who discuss the thematic and formal similarities between her memoir and her collection of short stories, *Wish I was Here*. Most of the critical work published about Kay's work either discuss her poetry, as part of a tradition of Black British or Scottish writing or focus on voice and the story of her adoption, mainly in her poetry collection *The Adoption Papers* (1991). Kay has insisted in several interviews that *The Adoption Papers* is mostly fictional and does not fully reflect her own adoption story, and that *Red Dust Road* is the first work that reveals the truth about her adoption and struggle growing up in Scotland.⁸ Also, *Wish I Was Here* has not received the critical attention it deserves, mostly because it has been dismissed by many critics for dealing with personal relationships, love and loneliness at the expense of larger questions such as identity and belonging and Scottishness.⁹ Although *Red Dust Road* and *Wish I Was Here* seem very different, their treatment of issues of identity and belonging is similar. Given the fact that the two works have not been studied side by side before, this chapter breaks new ground by focusing on the complexity of Kay's exploration of identity in the two works, especially in terms of her connection to Scotland.

Jackie Kay is a Scottish poet, novelist, dramatist, and children's book writer. She was born in 1961 in Edinburgh to Elizabeth, a nurse from the small Highland town of Nairn, and Jonathan, from Nzagha village in Ukpok, Nigeria. She was then adopted by John and Helen Kay, a white, communist, Scottish couple, and grew up in Glasgow. Throughout her career,

⁷ Matthew Brown, 'In/outside Scotland: Race and Citizenship in the Work of Jackie Kay', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Berthold Schoene-Harwood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 219–26 (p. 220).

⁸ See for example: Lizbeth Goodman, 'Interview with Jackie Kay', in *Feminist Stages: Interviews with Women in Contemporary British Theatre*, ed. by Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1996), pp. 251–59; Nancy K. Gish, 'Adoption, Identity, and Voice: Jackie Kay's Inventions of Self', in *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by Marianne Novy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 171–92.

⁹ See for example: Carla Rodríguez González, 'Re-charting the Black Atlantic: Jackie Kay's Cartographies of the Self', *Études écossaises*, 17 (2015), 103–119; Michael Parker, 'Hybrid Voices and Visions: The Short Stories of E.A. Markham, Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Patricia Duncker, and Jackie Kay', in *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, ed. by David Malcolm (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), pp. 308–29; Barbara Korte, 'Speaking from Border Country: Colour as Fluid Identity Factor in the Short Stories of Jackie Kay', in *Gender and Short Fiction: Women's Tales in Contemporary Britain*, ed. by Jorge Sacido-Romero and Laura Lojo-Rodríguez (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 215–32.

she has won many awards for her work including the Saltire Society First book of the Year Award and the Scottish Arts Council Book Award for her first poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers* (1991), the Guardian Fiction Prize for her novel, *Trumpet* (1998), and book of the year at the Scottish Book awards for her memoir *Red Dust Road* (2010). She was also named Makar, the poet laureate of Scotland, from 2016 to 2021. However, her work still has not received the critical attention it deserves. According to Nancy Gish, Kay is still 'neither read nor heard by more than a few outside Scotland or England'.¹⁰ In this chapter I seek to place more focus on Kay's work and her engagement with identity, racism, and belonging in post-devolutionary Scotland.

Most of Kay's writing – across the disparate genres of memoir, poetry, fiction, and drama – tackles issues of identity, belonging, and difference. In *Red Dust Road*, the emphasis on multiple locations and movement can be seen as a way of articulating and formulating a more inclusive national identity in post-devolutionary Scotland, whereas the use of a series of portrayals of people living in unidentified locations and battling with self-image in *Wish I Was Here* can be read as a challenge to a racialised and self-enclosed Scotland. The connection between *Wish I Was Here* and Scottish identity is apparent from the title itself, which is widely seen as a reference to Kevin MacNeil and Alec Finlay's poetry collection, *Wish I Was Here: Scottish Multicultural Anthology*, published in 2000. Also, the stories in *Wish I was Here* give glimpses of the lives of ordinary people, which open the way for an investigation of cultural, social or racial identity and national belonging in Scotland.

Before analysing Kay's representation of identity in detail, it is important to locate her in the wider frame of post-devolutionary Scotland and explain how her work engages with issues of national belonging and inclusivity. I will trace how she attempts to give voice to minorities who are usually marginalized within the discourse of national identity in Scotland, especially in light of arguments, such as Joseph Jackson's in *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain*, that incidents of racism and racial abuse are more 'common in Scotland compared to England and Wales'.¹¹ My detailed discussion of Kay's memoir *Red Dust Road* will investigate how she creatively departs from

¹⁰ Nancy K. Gish, 'Absent Voices: Modern Women Writers in Celtic Countries,' *Literature Compass*, 10.1 (2013), 45–52 (p. 47).

¹¹ Joseph Jackson, *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 2.

the conventional structure of a memoir to problematize issues relating to identity, social change, and hybridity. The analysis will include an exploration of how Kay uses her adoption story to articulate her identity struggle and depict her sense of isolation and of being an outsider in Scotland. I will explore how the theme of adoption is presented through stories, 'fable', and 'myth', that Kay inherits from her adopted parents. Kay uses these imaginary stories to mediate her identity and sense of belonging while tracing her birth parents. Kay's complex approach to identity will be investigated through analysis of her formal choices; she uses recurring stories, fragmented imagery and sketches, which shift focus each time they are told, to complicate discussions of cultural difference and language.

Kay's attempts to empower minorities is apparent in her collection of short stories, *Wish I Was Here*, which experiments with multiple voices to stress the unfinished nature of identity formation. My analysis of the stories will concentrate on racialised body images, skin colour, the body's reflection in mirrors, and interlinked voices. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay explains that reading Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*,¹² as a Black Scottish woman, has 'changed the mirror that [she] held up to [her]self' (p. 40). Therefore, I will investigate how she uses the mirror imagery in both works as a way of exploring the complexity of identity, and challenging racism and social injustices. In this chapter, I hope to elucidate that both texts destabilise notions of unified and fixed identities by presenting a complex negotiation of the self within the constraints of belonging to Scotland.

Navigating Black British Writings in Post Devolutionary Scotland

In this section, I will consider Kay in the context of post-devolution Scottish literature, emphasising how she explores her hybrid cultural identity to challenge conventional ideas about Scottishness and Britishness. In particular, I will focus on how Kay challenges readers' assumptions about what defines Scottish identity to demonstrate that Scottishness is not limited to a specific ethnicity, race or gender. Kay's writing (*Red Dust Road* and *Wish I Was Here*) will be read through the lens of critical debates about race, ethnicity, belonging,

¹² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann, New edn. (London: Pluto, 2008).

Britishness, and multiculturalism (in the wake of Scottish devolution). Her interest in such themes, as well as her tendency to explore different literary genres, are the main reasons for 'the shortage of sustained critical attention to her writing'.¹³ In the current chapter, I seek to redress this scholarly imbalance.

According to Paul Gilroy,

To be British is, in any case, to contract into a category of administrative convenience rather than an ethnic identity. It's an ambiguous word which often refuses it's [sic] own obvious cultural referents [...] The disjuncture between the two terms [British and English], is a continual reminder not just of English dominance over Scots, Welsh and Irish people, but also that a British state can exist comfortably without the benefit of a unified British culture.¹⁴

Gilroy's observations summarise the struggle of Black British writers to create a sense of cultural belonging or national identity in Britain and demonstrate how such complexity is more pronounced for writers living in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland compared to those living in England. However, the 'British state' that Gilroy describes has changed significantly since the 1997 election that resulted in Westminster devolving some of its power to Scotland and Wales. For Cairns Craig, the 1997 referendum marked 'the political reflection of a Scotland which has already been constituted, a Scotland in union with itself rather than in union with England'.¹⁵ This observation emphasises the tensions between ideas of Scottishness, Englishness, and Britishness, which seem to be central to literary debates in post-devolutionary Scottish writing, along with questions of authenticity, identity, and language.

Scottish devolution has permitted new ways of focusing on issues of belonging, identity, and race. This accords with Graeme Macdonald's argument in 'Scottish Extraction: "Race" and racism in Devolutionary Fiction' that most contemporary Scottish writings tend to challenge the way Scottish identities are largely understood in terms of ethnicity.

¹³ Clandfield, 'What Is In My Blood', p. 2.

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p. 75.

¹⁵ Cairns Craig quoted in Brown, 'In/outside Scotland', p. 220.

Macdonald goes on to assert that devolution has intensified the 'wider contemporary debate on race and ethnicity in Scotland'.¹⁶

Many critics, including Ian Brown, Graeme Macdonald, and Alice Ferrebe, argue that the political changes in Scotland brought about by the 1997 referendum caused a surge in literary works that renegotiate concepts of Scottishness, language, national identity, and authenticity. The period witnessed a shift in Scottish literature from an interest in class and social elitism, which is seen in the work of writers such as Irvine Welsh, James Kelman, Janice Galloway, and Tom Leonard, among many others, to a sustained focus on issues of Scottish identity. This engagement with ideas of Scottishness and national belonging can be seen not only in Kay's work, but also in that of many other twenty-first century, post-devolutionary female Scottish writers, including Leila Aboulela, Maya Choudhry, and Sophie Cooke. After all, according to Cairns Craig in *The Modern Scottish Novel*,

The fundamental role of narrative in the formation of national identity has come increasingly to be recognised in "nation theory": indeed, it is now often argued that nations are nothing more than narratives and that it is through the narrative arts that national identities are established, maintained and elaborated.¹⁷

Craig's remark can be applied to Kay's writing. In her work, Kay has always been preoccupied with the complexity and contradictions of the self. When asserting her Black Scottish identity, she contends 'the self is multitudes. The self is complex and contradictory. It is all right for me, for instance, to say I'm Black and I'm Scottish; it's not a contradiction for me, although lots of people regard it as such. That is my experience; I'm Black and I'm Scottish. There is no problem with that at all'.¹⁸ She continues to explain that when writing about Black Scottish women 'you're questioning and challenging people's assumptions of what they think of as Black and what they think of as Scottish right away'.¹⁹ It can safely be deduced that the political change in Scotland following the reestablishment of the parliament in 1999 has instigated a new wave of Scottish writers who defied conventional understanding of issues of identity, race, and belonging.

¹⁶ Macdonald, 'Scottish Extractions', p. 80.

¹⁷ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 10.

¹⁸ Jackie Kay, in Gish, 'Adoption, Identity, and Voice', p. 174.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 179.

As Alice Ferrebe argues, ‘the increasing prominence of Black writers (Jackie Kay, Suhayl Saadi, and Luke Sutherland, for example) within Scottish literature prompts consideration of the role of race within presiding constructions of Scottish identity, and of the existence of a colour line beyond pronunciation’.²⁰ Such writers refuse to view Scottish identity as fixed and inherent. Instead, they offer a fresh perspective and a new way of depicting national identity that includes different races, genders, and tongues. Matthew Brown suggests that ‘Black writers’ such as Jackie Kay invented unique voices ‘to address and promote hybrid, cross-cultural modes of national affiliation’ not only with Scotland but also with Britain, which ‘they affirm, is their country’.²¹ In the unsettled climate of the post-devolution age, Kay ‘voiced the unease of those minorities who have been excluded from traditional mappings of Scottishness’.²²

In her fiction, Kay attempts to empower her characters by giving them a voice to change both themselves and the societies they live in, as can be seen in her novel *Trumpet* (1998).²³ The novel narrates the story of a Black Scottish Jazz trumpeter called Joss Moody, who is discovered to be ‘in possession of the female body parts’ upon his death.²⁴ The novel depicts an ‘overarching ontological concern with the ways in which identity and subjectivity are constituted – in terms of the symbolic order as manifested in discourse of gender, Scottishness and colour’.²⁵ In the novel, as in much of Kay’s work, Kay presents her own modulation of a Scottish identity that defies the social definition of the stranger. What is particularly interesting is that Kay does not present her characters as being entirely defined by their gender or sexuality, she attempts to show their subjectivity and their struggle to attain an identity despite social and cultural restrictions. After all, Kay’s representation of characters as lonely and isolated can be seen as a reflection of Scottish cultural

²⁰ Alice Ferrebe, ‘Between Camps: Masculinity, Race and Nation in Post-devolution Scotland’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Berthold Schoene-Harwood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 275–82 (p. 276).

²¹ Brown, ‘In/outside Scotland’, p. 220.

²² Carla Sassi, ‘The (B)order in Modern Scottish Literature’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 145–55 (p. 155).

²³ Jackie Kay, *Trumpet* (London: Picador, 1999).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁵ Alison Lumsden, ‘Jackie Kay’s Poetry and Prose: Constructing Identity’, in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, ed. by Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 79–92 (p. 87).

surroundings. Alex Thomson explains that representations of ‘negativity and alienation’ in Scottish writings are seen as ‘simply a reflection of social reality.’²⁶

Trumpet’s overt concern with the social construction of gender identity and the difficulties people face to invent themselves in an overly masculine Scottish culture highlights the intersectionality of identity, race, gender, and sexuality. Kay’s engagement with such issues and her attempt to defy conventional social structures in Scotland is reminiscent of the work of Scottish writer Janice Galloway. One of the most prominent Scottish women writers during the 1980s and 1990s, Galloway used gender issues as ‘a means by which to break open the contemporary Scottish experience and reveal what previous decades of Scottish writing had elided’.²⁷ Galloway’s writings in the 1980s helped to empower female voices that were somewhat lacking in the Scottish cultural scene. Galloway pushed boundaries and broke open the Scottish literary scene for other female writers. For example, in one of her most celebrated novels, *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing* (1989),²⁸ Galloway depicts the isolation her main character, Joy Stone, experiences in Scotland. Joy’s experience can be seen as an embodiment of ‘the extent to which women have been alienated by social expectation and condemnations’.²⁹

Like Galloway, Kay is regarded as a writer who ‘opens doors for others’ by representing Scottish minorities, mixed race, and adopted individuals, in the context of heated debate about what it means to be Scottish, and a broader reassessment of Scotland’s political and cultural identity.³⁰ In Galloway’s novels, as well as in Kay’s works, Scotland is exposed as a land filled with tension and discrimination. These tensions help explain why Kay decided to leave Scotland and live in Manchester, as she explains in an interview published in 2006: ‘I left Scotland because it didn’t feel welcoming to me, because

²⁶ Alex Thomson, ‘Alienation and Community in Contemporary Scottish Fiction: The Case of Janice Galloway’s *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*’, in *Community in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. by Scott Lyall (Netherlands: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 160–78 (p. 161).

²⁷ Cristie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland: Welsh, McLean, Warner, Banks, Galloway and Kennedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 109.

²⁸ Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (London: Minerva, 1991).

²⁹ March, p. 111.

³⁰ Alastair Niven, ‘New Diversity, Hybridity and Scottishness’, in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume 3, Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*, ed. by Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pittock, Ksenija Horvat, and Ashley Hales (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 320–31 (p. 323).

people were always asking me where I was from, because it wasn't easy to be openly gay'.³¹ Through her writing, however, she endeavours to tackle such difficult realities and to demonstrate that there are multiple versions of Scottish identity. Much like Galloway in the 1980s, Kay has become 'an iconic figure to young aspiring black and Asian writers' through her tireless attempts to challenge prevailing conceptions of Scottish identity and to show that Scotland is not only white.³²

Although she resides outside of Scotland, Kay's interest in Scottishness and the Black Scottish struggle can be seen in her poetry collections, including *The Adoption Papers* (1991), *Other Lovers* (1993), *Life Mask* (2005) and *Fiere* (2011). Kay challenges readers to make connections and question the author's relationship to the characters portrayed in each work. She presents characters battling with marginalisation and issues of identity. Although these poems can be interpreted as narratives of Kay's personal struggle as an adopted Black woman living in Scotland, the reader could not grasp the full story of her adoption until she chose to share the story in her memoir/autobiography *Red Dust Road* in 2010. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay narrates her experience of being mixed race, adopted Scottish. Kay explains that she has always been viewed as an 'other' in Scotland and that the racism she faced growing up in Glasgow has caused her a lot of identity struggle. She narrates her personal experience in *Red Dust Road*:

I spent some of my childhood wishing I was white like the other kids and feeling like I stuck out in Scotland like a sore thumb; and now, in Nigeria I'm wishing I was black, and feeling like I stick out like a sore thumb. It's the first time in my life that I've properly understood what it means being mixed race. It's not a term I've ever embraced, and I've always felt more black than white; but now here suddenly in Nigeria, people are following me around Ukpok market and touching my skin and saying *Oyibo* and *Onye Ocha* [white person]! I realize I want to be accepted. I want other Nigerians to see in my face that my father is an Igbo. (*Red Dust Road*, p. 216)

This quotation illustrates the complexity of Kay's, as well as many mixed race and adopted Scots, identity negotiation. It also shows a struggle for social and cultural acceptance. Kay has made it her life's mission to challenge racist mind sets and to underscore that she can

³¹ Jackie Kay quoted in Bettina Jansen, *Narratives of Community in the Black British Short Story* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 155.

³² Niven, p. 324.

be both Black and Scottish. As Kay has remarked, 'it seems to me that when you are mixed race, people see you in restricted ways depending on where they are [...] there is restriction that they are placing on the view, on the gaze, on the way that they are looking at you'.³³ By speaking against these forms of racism, Kay challenges the way identity is perceived based on ethnicity. Also, by locating herself both inside and outside of Scotland, Kay draws attention to issues of inclusivity and the limitations of belonging and national identity.

As I mentioned at the beginning, in *Red Dust Road* and in *Wish I was Here* Kay uses innovative literary techniques and imagery of fragmentation to engage with issues of identity and belonging. Cairns Craig has commented that the tendency by the new Scottish writers to depart from traditional 'novelistic styles' is a way of stressing 'the bleak and depressing worlds inhabited [by their] characters of post-devolutionary Scotland.'³⁴ However, Kay and many other Scottish writers also emphasise the need to express and retell diverse narratives and experiences which shows an optimistic vision of a changed Scotland where everyone can feel a sense of belonging.

'I always was somebody else after all': Self-identity and Belonging in *Red Dust Road*

The focus in this section is Jackie Kay's memoir, *Red Dust Road* (2010). In her memoir, Kay explores themes relating to her adoption, the racism she faced while growing up in Scotland, her search for her birth parents, and her struggle with belonging and identity. In her introduction to the book, Nicola Sturgeon, the first minister of Scotland (2014 – 2023), writes, 'The ability to recognize and embrace different identities is an integral part of Jackie's human, inclusive, celebratory vision of life' (p. xiii). Sturgeon's comment highlights some of the themes that govern Kay's story of adoption, particularly identity, race, and inclusive belonging. Also, the framing of Kay's narrative through Sturgeon's introduction signifies that reimagining post-devolutionary Scotland is an integral part of Kay's self-

³³ Jackie Kay in conversation with Petra Tournay-Theodotou, "'Some Connection with the Place': Exploring Displacement and Belonging with Jackie Kay", *Transition*, 113.1 (2014), 82–101 (p. 97).

³⁴ Cairns Craig, 'Devolving the Scottish Novel', in *A concise companion to contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 120–35 (p. 127).

representation. Sturgeon's introduction shows the interplay between politics and culture as important factors in Kay's exploration of her identity. Kay writes her identity as Black, Scottish, of Nigerian descent, lesbian, being brought up by a white communist couple in Glasgow, and choosing to live in Manchester, England. In a sense, Kay's changing sense of home and belonging is being linked to post-devolutionary politics in Scotland and writing her memoir is fuelled by a wish to inspire cultural and political change to ideas of Scottishness and belonging.

In many ways, *Red Dust Road* is not merely an adoption story concerned with the author's search for her roots or origins; it is a journey towards self-discovery that is mediated through a sense of place, storytelling, and search for belonging. Kay is forging a 'connection with the place' of her Nigerian ancestors (pp. 169-170), while dreaming that one day the 'land might welcome' (p. 169) her. She also endeavours to retell stories and create memories in the hope that the land of her birth, Scotland, may at least 'blush with recognition' (p. 124). In this section, Kay's memoir will be read in connection to post-devolutionary Scottish narratives to investigate how her engagement with identity and often neglected forms of racism and social discrimination, challenges conventional understanding of racial identity, belonging, and Scottishness. Kay's reimagining of Scottishness is seen as a way of registering the 'collapse of Britishness'³⁵ as a unitary cultural term in the 2000s.

Red Dust Road is an imaginative and creative narrative that departs from traditional structure, as it does not follow a linear storyline nor confine itself to a single narrator. The story is told in chapters presented as memories that move between the past and the present, with a sustained focus on identity, adoption, and mobility. Each chapter is given a title that reflects a specific detail about the events related in that chapter. The titles are either dates, such as "1969," "1971," "1976," "1977"; locations, such as "Nicon Hilton Hotel," "Abuja," "Manchester," "Hilton Hotel," "Milton Keynes," "Ivy Cottage," "Nairn," "Mull"; or journeys, such as "Christchurch to Glasgow," "Lagos to Ukpör via Oguta," and "Enugu back to Lagos". There are two chapters that specifically address racism called "Fantasy Africa" and "Reality Britain". Also, Kay's memoir presents blurred images and

³⁵ Macdonald, 'Scottish Extractions', p. 79.

stories about the past that are retold and remembered in different fragments, which invites the reader to make connections between these pieces, a point to which I will return.

In an essay from 1994, years before Kay penned her memoir, she wrote:

It is important for me to challenge structures and stereotypes not just in the content of what I'm saying but in the style. The discovery that poems need not rhyme, that stories need not have a definite beginning, middle and end, that plays do not need to be all dialogue, was like a liberation in itself. I think that writing with a political motive must also include a challenge to traditional styles. That is also part of the politics. Finding a new language to complement radical ideas.³⁶

Thus, writing her memoir in an unconventional manner can be seen as a way of challenging normative ideas and styles. Kay explicitly indicates that her formal choices are motivated by her wish to defy traditional ways of thinking when it comes to ideas of belonging and Scottishness, which merit further investigation. These unconventional style choices are an expression of Kay's 'abiding interest in individuals whose lives cross conventional borders of nation, race, or gender and challenge the constraints of gendered, national, and racialized conceptions of identity.'³⁷ So, it is not only her life story that Kay is presenting in her memoir, but a complex form of cultural and racial identity that challenges fixed notions of Scottishness and national belonging.

Kay uses the memoir genre to express the complexity of identity and belonging. Susheila Nasta defines life writing (including the genre of memoir) as 'a hybrid vehicle which can stretch and reshape the often unstable boundaries between genres, interrogate questions of subjectivity and open up the symbolic borders of new or previously contested national histories.'³⁸ In this sense, Kay uses her own life story to redefine Scottishness and to shape an image of Scotland that is more diverse and accepting of difference. Kay does not take the role of a bystander and wait for Scottish society to change; on the contrary she instigates the change she wants to see in the society. This accords with Mark Stein's argument that Black British writers 'are not only inscribed by the cultures they inhabit, they

³⁶ Jackie Kay, 'Let It Be Told', *Kunapipi*, 16.1 (1994) <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/93>>, p. 536.

³⁷ In: Tournay-Theodotou, 'Exploring Displacement and Belonging with Jackie Kay', p. 83.

³⁸ Susheila Nasta, 'Editorial', *Wasafiri*, 21.2 (2006), 1–2 (p. 1).

in turn mould those very cultures.’³⁹ My argument is that Kay uses the genre of memoir in *Red Dust Road* to defy common conceptions about race, ethnicity, adoption, identity, belonging, and the relationship between them. Her position as an insider and an outsider to Scottish society has affected how she perceives her identity and therefore fuels her pursuit of a more inclusive sense of belonging.

Red Dust Road is a narrative about the exploration of a complex sense of identity. There is a sustained interest in identity throughout most of Kay’s work. She explains in an interview that she ‘will always be interested in identity, how fluid it is, how people can invent themselves, how it can never be fixed or frozen.’⁴⁰ This notion of a “fluid” identity is what Kay endeavours to capture while telling her story in *Red Dust Road*. By using a non-linear narrative, Kay emphasises an idea of the self that is neither coherent nor unified but rather consists of multiple layers that are revealed through memories and stories. However, fluidity does not have to entail fragmentation. Kay presents tensions between different dimensions of her identity, which motivates her to fight against stereotypical understanding of identity and fuels her quest to articulate her own perspectives. In her memoir, Kay explores different layers of her complex identity, which include being Black, adopted, and raised by white communist parents in Glasgow while searching for her biological mother and father, as well as being a single mother who chose to raise her son outside of Scotland. How identity can shift and change throughout time and between different cultures, languages, and perspectives is one of the main themes in *Red Dust Road*.

Growing up in Glasgow, Kay was self-conscious about her identity and difference. These feelings were triggered by her sense of loneliness and isolation from the Black community and culture. It was tough to be the only Black kid in her school. Describing the difficulty of being different as a child, she writes, ‘My classmates would look at me whenever Africa was mentioned’ (p. 39). This sense of difference caused the young Kay to feel marginalized in the predominantly white Scottish society. She explains, ‘Something to me has been born of a sense of aloneness, a feeling of being marginalized.’⁴¹ Kay’s location in Scotland accentuated her differences and limited her ability to interact with Black culture.

³⁹ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State university press, 2004), p. 36.

⁴⁰ Neil Astley, *New Blood* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books: 1999), p. 73.

⁴¹ Kay, ‘Let It Be Told’, p. 535.

This spatial displacement forced Kay to ‘forge an imaginative exchange sought out precisely because of the challenges of physical space.’⁴² This imaginative exchange is manifested through her writing; as she explains,

It struck me then how important it is to be in an environment where you do not feel an outsider, where you have so few reflections of yourself. Conversely, it is often exactly this feeling of intense isolation that produces writing.’⁴³

The feeling of being an outsider in Scotland creates a clash between her own sense of identity and her sense of how society actually perceives her. It is only through her writing that she can shift these boundaries between self and other. *Red Dust Road* conveys a sense of cultural isolation and ‘otherness’ by suggesting that ‘identities are also socially constructed and determined by wider social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They may be reinterpreted or even imposed upon certain groups or individuals by others, often as a result of inequalities of power and authority. In this case identities may be divisive and repressive or even rebellious and subversive.’⁴⁴ Either way, Kay’s theorization of her identity in *Red Dust Road* is mediated through her sense of isolation and marginalization growing up in Scotland.

Being both Black and Scottish means that Kay is caught between the opposition of outsider/insider. She explains in ‘Let It Be Told’, published in 1994, that ‘at first when [she] really began to acknowledge [her] blackness, [she] wanted to deny [her] Scottishness, because [she] felt ashamed at being so old without knowing any kind of black culture.’⁴⁵ The same ideas are presented in *Red Dust Road*, where she clarifies that such shame suggests that her ability to choose her own identity is limited by dominant social perspectives. At first, she sees herself through the eyes of the dominant society as an outsider, as someone who has no right to claim a full Scottish identity, but later she rejects this vision of identity and decides that she no longer needs social approval to be both Black and Scottish. Thus, coming to the conclusion that she could embrace both aspects of her identity and that ‘one need not exclude the other’ (p. 201), inspired her to challenge normative assumptions about

⁴² Samantha Pinto, ‘The World and the “Jar”’: Jackie Kay and the Feminist Futures of the Black Diaspora’, *Atlantic Studies*, 7.3 (2010), 263–84 (p. 269).

⁴³ Kay, ‘Let It Be Told’, p. 534.

⁴⁴ Rebecca Kay, ‘Identity and Marginality’, *eSharp*, 6.1 (2005), 1–6 (p. 1).

⁴⁵ Kay, ‘Let it be Told’, p. 535.

what it means to be both Black and Scottish. She further theorizes her relationship with Scotland when she states,

What interests me particularly is the way in which you can be in a society that is cordoned off and oppressed but also be oppressed within that society, or divided within that or not belong to the common group in exactly the same way. I do think that sense of being outside with being inside Scotland - with being very proud of the country and very proud of being Scottish, and also being outside in terms of receiving a lot of racism from other Scottish people - is what fuels my sense of how and what I write.⁴⁶

In this interview Kay highlights the layered nature of belonging and oppression in Scotland. She explains that although the Scottish society is rather oppressed within Britain, ethnic minorities and mixed-race people like herself still face additional layers of exclusion and discrimination. These multiple levels of oppression have complicated her relationship to Scotland. Once again, the interplay between politics and culture is depicted as an integral part of Kay's presentation of her identity. Because she suffered from racism and rejection based on her racial identity, Kay rallies for a Scottish national identity 'that is not only white in colour',⁴⁷ but rather inclusive to different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

Through her writing Kay fights against such inequalities and refuses to accept being marginalized or 'othered' and often portrays a sense of resistance to social injustice. This resistance is clearly expressed in *Red Dust Road*. In a chapter titled "Reality Britain," Kay discusses several incidents that affected her while growing up in Scotland. She describes how at age six, when she started school, being called names like 'dirty darkie' (p. 185) would make her burst into tears. She explains that 'other people's assumptions of you, whether you want them to or not, do interfere with your own image of yourself.'⁴⁸ It was not until she was 18, when she went to a 'life-changing' meeting of the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent, that she was relieved to find 'other people who had experienced similar things' (p. 200). What is important is not that Kay presents her identity as torn

⁴⁶ Jackie Kay interviewed in Gish, pp. 179–80.

⁴⁷ Aniela Korzeniowska, 'Crossing Racial Frontiers in the Quest for Cultural Acceptance as Seen Through Selected Works by Jackie Kay', in *Crossroads in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Jacek Fabiszak, Ewa Urbaniak-Rybicka, and Bartosz Wolski (Berlin: Springer, 2013), pp. 421–31 (p. 425).

⁴⁸ Kay, 'Let it be told', p. 532.

between Black and Scottish, but that she keeps fighting against the way the dominant social group sees her as 'other'.

In a chapter titled "1987," Kay narrates a dream she had in which she gave birth to a fox:

In my dream. I'm out pushing my daughter the fox in a silver Cross navy hooded pram. She's wearing a nappy, my daughter the fox, a terry-towelling nappy. She's beautiful. I'm proud and overjoyed to be her mother. Strangers stop me and look into the pram. When they see my daughter the fox, they say, oh, she looks a lot like you. I smile at the strangers and say, Thank you. She does, doesn't she? She looks a lot like me (p. 91).

The dream occurred while she was trying to get pregnant with her son, Matthew, and might be understood to indicate a deep hope that she would finally be accepted in Scotland. The fact that Kay specifies a 'silver Cross navy hooded pram' and 'a terry-towelling nappy' reflects a sense of tradition and heritage. Both of these items are long standing as part of traditional childcare in Scotland and other parts of Britain. It seems that Kay shows a pride and affinity with such traditions and a wish to raise her child as part of it. The description of the 'strangers' acknowledging her 'daughter the fox's difference and complimenting her resemblance to Kay, indicates the struggle associated with the search for social recognition. It also further underlines that being accepted for her cultural difference is an integral part of Kay's realization of her identity, especially her Scottishness. This is apparent in the image of the fox which can be linked to Scottish mythology and traditions, in which foxes are usually presented as lonely, misunderstood animals that are always hunted and eradicated.⁴⁹ The foxes also symbolise adaptability and cunning, traits often celebrated in Scottish folklore.

The dream is also linked with another incident that happened to Kay as a child. In a chapter titled "1976," Kay retells a story from her childhood about her grandmother sending her a black Maori doll from New Zealand. Kay explains that she was fascinated by the huge doll, which she named Niari. Young Jackie used to walk her doll down the street in a pram, until one day 'a bigger girl stopped and looked in. She said, just cos you're a darkie doesn't mean you have to have a darkie doll' (p. 49). The older child's rejection of the black doll had a great impact on Kay's sense of belonging. The girl's remarks remind Kay of her 'otherness'

⁴⁹ See: Jim Crumley, *The last Wolf* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2010).

and difference. According to Stuart Hall, such remarks from white members of society have 'the power to make [Black people] see and experience [themselves] as "other"'.⁵⁰ Also, the scene shows the opposition between Kay's family who support and nourish her mixed-race identity, and the 'race-conscious'⁵¹ Scottish society that limits her identity choices and keeps reminding her that she is an outsider.

However, her dream about the fox, in which people smile and compliment the fox's difference, shows that Kay rejects such othering and is keen to redefine notions of Scottishness. The fact that she chooses to tackle these issues through fable and magic realism shows that although the encounters with the 'other' are instrumental to our understanding of identity, identities are not fully graspable and are open to multiple interpretations. Moreover, scattering these images across the memoir draws further attention to the unfinished quality of identity and prompts readers to attach meanings to these recurring images. The story of the fox is creatively narrated in her short story collection *Wish I Was Here*. Reading the story in connection to Kay's memoir further complicates its context, adding layers of meaning to its interpretation as a commentary on social injustices. After all, as Winfried Fluck contends, 'the meaning of the image is produced by the narrative context we bring to it'.⁵²

Kay further explains her experience with feelings of rejection in a chapter titled "Fantasy Africa," where she writes,

In my mind. It is not so much that being black in a white country means that people don't accept you as say, Scottish; it is that being black in a white country makes you a stranger to yourself [...] Children have an intense need to belong and anything that marks them out as different from all the other children will then form a straggly queue of uneasy, queasy questions in their head (p. 38).

Being a "stranger to yourself" manifests as an interaction between an interior and an exterior self, both of which are integral parts of identity definition. Such childhood experiences affected the way in which she thinks, defines, and interacts with herself and

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222–37 (p. 225).

⁵¹ Stein, *Black British Literature*, p. 39.

⁵² Winfried Fluck, 'Reading for Recognition', *New Literary History*, 44.1 (2013), 45–67 (p. 50).

others. These same experiences lead to identity struggle and a tendency to see herself as other.

This interaction between self and other shifts the theme of Kay's memoir from what Sara Ahmed has called 'identity to identification.'⁵³ In a chapter about 'Autobiography as an identification practice', theorist Sara Ahmed discusses the positioning of Black women within cultural identification. Ahmed explains that Black women are usually perceived within their social context not with reference to their distinctive identities or their right to belong but according to preconceived physical and social understandings of belonging. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay depicts a struggle between her perspective of her own identity, and how people interpret what they see according to preconceived conventions about who should and should not belong. One instance of this shift from identity to identification occurs when 'My mum introduced me as her daughter, and the old lady says, "is that lady your daughter? Oh? Your daughter is awful tanned. Is she that colour every day?"' (p. 194) This incident is similar to one described by Sara Ahmed, in which she was stopped by two police officers and marked as 'somebody who does not belong' to the area based entirely on her skin colour, about which one of the police officers remarked, 'It's a sun-tan, isn't it?'⁵⁴ Both Kay and Ahmed are positioned as outsiders and are made aware of their difference, entirely based on the way they look. These incidents also show a persistent social 'preoccupation with the identification and registration of "difference"'⁵⁵ and how physical appearance is often seen as a marker of cultural identity.

This theorization recalls Charlotte Williams's essay 'I Going Away, I Going Home', where she argues against the 'closures' of 'national space'⁵⁶ and calls for the recognition of 'multiple points of identification' as a way of understanding cultural and personal identity.⁵⁷ Williams explains that autobiography work by Black feminists becomes a negotiation

⁵³ Sara Ahmed, "'It's a Sun-tan, Isn't it?': Auto-biography as an Identificatory Practice', in *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, ed. by Heidi Safia Mirza (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 153–67 (p. 157); The concept of identity and identification has been discussed by many critics including Stuart Hall in the introduction to his book *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996).

⁵⁴ Ahmed, pp. 158–59.

⁵⁵ Brown, 'In/outside Scotland', p. 226.

⁵⁶ Charlotte Williams, "'I Going Away, I Going Home": Mixed-"Race" Movement, and Identity', in *Devolving Identities: Feminist Readings in Home and Belonging*, ed. by Lynne Pearce (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 179–95 (p. 194).

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 180.

between individual identities and 'wider contextual immersion', aiming at reinscribing nations with a 'black presence'.⁵⁸ Such negotiation is complicated by multiple contradictions such as 'gender, race, territory, national alliances'.⁵⁹ This understanding gives rise to a fluid sense of belonging that does not conform to traditional binaries such as black/white. In the essay, Williams highlights the intersection of race, movement, and identity. She explains that border-crossing and journeys, whether physical or imaginative, give prominence to themes of 'home and exile, local and global consciousness, dispossession and belonging, hybridity and mixing and question notions of "pure" and "authentic" identities.'⁶⁰ The presence of these contradictions and intersections makes cultural and personal identity creation through multiple points of identification more complicated.

Kay has always been adamant about asserting her cultural identity and showing that she can be both Black and Scottish at the same time. This is evident in the way she uses words from the Scots dialect, especially 'broad Glaswegian' (p. 193) when in conversation with her parents or a 'soft Highland accent' (p. 153) when in conversation with her aunts. For example, when her Aunt Phyllis asks her to post spoons to Nairn, she says, 'Doesnie maiter if I've got yin already' (p. 157). This use of dialect shows that language is central to Kay's sense of identity and belonging, especially as Scottish, and also highlights the connection between language and place. As Matthew Pateman argues, Kay's 'use of Scots-language' can be perceived as a marker that identifies Kay 'as part of a speech community which is also a section of a national community: Scotland.'⁶¹ In addition, as Peter Clandfield contends, 'Kay's Scots voice functions [...] as a reminder that Scotland is a multi-racial territory.'⁶²

Some glimpses of the connection between racial identity and accent can be seen in Kay's memoir. For instance, when Kay calls the library in Milton Keynes looking for her birth mother after her mother failed to appear to their arranged meeting, the librarian recognizes

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 181.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 182.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 181.

⁶¹ Matthew Pateman, 'Adopting Cultures and Embodying Myths in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* and *Red Dust Road*', in *Roots and Fruits of Scottish Culture: Scottish Identities, History and Contemporary Literature*, ed. by Ian Brown, and Jean Berton (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2014), pp. 65–81 (p. 69).

⁶² Clandfield, p. 4.

her voice immediately ('I recognize your voice from the radio. You're not Jackie Kay?' (p. 73)) and then proceeds to say how much she loves her poetry. This scene comes as a striking contrast to another scene, in which Kay meets a strange woman in a bar. Kay recognizes the woman's 'broad Glaswegian' accent and proceeds to ask her 'You're from Glasgow, aren't you?'. The woman answers 'Aye! How did you know that?'. When Kay excitedly replies, 'I'm from Glasgow myself', the woman stares at Kay and says 'You're not, are you? Ya foreign-looking bugger!' (p. 193). Kay's voice is presented as a strong determiner of her Scottish identity, which the woman is unable to recognise because she immediately equates Kay's racial identity with 'foreign'. Thus, by marking Kay as an 'other' or a foreigner, the woman renders her invisible from the social construction of Scottishness.

In *Red Dust Road* Kay always emphasises her Scottish accent and portrays it as an often-ignored marker of her identity, such as when an old lady asks her, 'Are you from America, dear?' Kay writes, 'She can't hear my obvious Scottish accent because she can only see my face. If you have a skin my colour, you must be a foreigner' (p. 192). Instead of hearing her accent as a marker of similarity, her race is 'singled out as the marker of difference.'⁶³ Kay also remarks on her grandmother's accent:

When my gran returned [to Scotland], her Fife accent had become so broad, such a mixture of Lochgelly and nostalgia, that her old friends had difficulty understanding her! [...] Her Scottishness had become, all those miles away, the thing she valued about herself the most (p. 19).

This remark suggests a conception of language that is flexible and inseparable from identity and self-expression.

Elsewhere, rejection of one's own tongue can be seen as a rejection of one's nation, in this case Scotland. When Kay meets her birth mother, Kay is disappointed that her 'Highland accent had gone completely' and that she now had 'an English accent' (p. 71). As Kay says, 'I thought she'd have hung on to her tongue. But then she felt Scotland had let her down. "Scotland is very racist," she said' (p. 71). The act of hanging on to one's tongue mentioned by Kay indicates a will and a choice. Therefore, her mother consciously chose not

⁶³ C.L. Innes, 'Accent and Identity: Women Poets of Many Parts', in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 315–42 (p. 335).

to retain her Scottish tongue. By rejecting her own tongue, she is choosing to be outside of Scotland not only physically but also linguistically and even emotionally and culturally. Also, the phrase 'hung on to her tongue' carries a striking metaphor that suggests a strong connection between the figurative and the physical. It can also be linked to the fact that words can cause emotional damage, much like physical injury can, a connection that is made by Kay in her collection of short stories *Why Don't You Stop Talking*.⁶⁴ In the title story, Kay depicts a Black woman living in London who decides to cut off her own tongue after suffering from racial abuse, describing the pain as 'deserved'.⁶⁵ This self-inflicted physical injury highlights the strong effects of racism and racial aggression. It also strongly links the tongue, both literary and metaphorically, to national belonging. As in the description of Kay's mother in *Red Dust Road*, in which the tongue is intimately bound with questions of cultural identity and assimilation, one's tongue is deeply connected to the internalisation of racism and racial identity.

However, difference and resemblance as markers of cultural identity are strongly connected to social context and location. When Kay travels to Nigeria to meet her relatives, her accent, which in Scotland signifies national belonging and resemblance to others, indicates difference. Her relatives find her accent 'funny' and like nothing they have ever heard before, thereby marking Kay as an outsider again. As in Scotland, in Nigeria her skin colour also marks her as different. People at Ukpok Market point at her and shout "Oyibo" (p. 215), meaning a white person. Kay remarks on the incident by saying, 'I spent some of my childhood wishing I was white like other kids and feeling like I stuck out in Scotland like a sore thumb, and now, in Nigeria, I'm wishing I was black [...] I want to be accepted' (p. 216). The fact that Kay uses the imagery of a 'sore thumb' to describe her childhood in Scotland shows how her experience with racism is so distorting and traumatic that it has led her to see herself as an 'other'. She also considers how the search for social acceptance might distort a person's self-identity. Once again, Kay demonstrates how identity is ever-changing and in constant flux. Her comment shows that difference is relative and what marks a person as different depends on social context and location.

⁶⁴ Jackie Kay, *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (London: Picador, 2002).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

In *Red Dust Road* Kay engages with contemporary debates around national identity by 'inserting questions of racial difference'⁶⁶ into her redefinition of Scottishness. The narrative provides a complex representation of the insider/outsider through an assessment of Kay's changing relationships to multiple homelands. Kay demonstrates that,

[t]he self is multitudes. The self is complex and often contradictory. It's all right for me, for instance, to say I'm Black and I'm Scottish; it's not a contradiction for me, although lots of people regard it as such. That is my experience; I'm Black and I'm Scottish. There is no problem with that at all.⁶⁷

By telling her own story, Kay uses 'self-definition through the act of writing' to complicate 'issues of language, voice and cultural identity'⁶⁸ and alerts readers 'to the fact that [her country] is made up of many different Scotlands, and increasingly we hear more varied voices from Scots who are not fair-haired, blue-eyed Celtic males.'⁶⁹ Kay tells her own story to explore themes of inclusion, hybridity, and cultural identity in post-devolutionary Scotland.

'Sketching over something that had already been sketched over': Adoption and Self-realization

In narrating her adoption story, Jackie Kay takes us on a journey through myth, fantasy, expectation, and, most importantly, reality. As previously mentioned, Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a mother from the Scottish Highlands and a father from Ukpok, Nigeria, but was immediately adopted by Helen and John Kay, a white, communist couple from Glasgow, Scotland. The policy of transcultural adoption was instigated in Britain because of the growing government concerns 'about high numbers of minority ethnic children in the care system.'⁷⁰ Previous first minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon, who wrote

⁶⁶ Brown, 'In/outside Scotland', p. 220.

⁶⁷ Kay in Gish, 'Adoption, Identity, and Voice', p. 174.

⁶⁸ Suhayl Saadi, 'Songs of the Village Idiot: Ethnicity, Writing and Identity', in *Ethically Speaking: Voice and Values in Modern Scottish Writing* ed. by James McGonigal and Kirsten Stirling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 117–38 (p. 117).

⁶⁹ Zoë Strachan, 'Is That a Scot or am Ah Wrong?', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Schoene-Harwood, Berthold (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 51–6 (p. 54).

⁷⁰ Ravinder Barn, and Derek Kirton, 'Transracial Adoption in Britain: Politics, Ideology and Reality', *Adoption & Fostering*, 36 (2012), 25–37 (p. 27).

the introduction to *Red Dust Road*, talked about the injustices implemented through such forced adoption policies in Scotland. She explained on 22 March 2023 that many pregnant, unmarried women in Scotland were stigmatized and coerced to give up their babies for adoption between the 1950s and the 1970s.⁷¹ On behalf of her government, Sturgeon apologized for the forced adoptions and the many injustices that were inflicted on these women and their babies. Sturgeon continues to explain that young women were sent to what were called mother-and-baby homes to give birth and were called selfish, ‘bullied or ignored’ if they refused to give their babies for adoption.⁷² Sturgeon claimed in her speech that these practices were ‘the product of a society where women were regarded as second class citizens; where [...] people in authority had too much power’.⁷³ By speaking about her closed adoption and the difficulties of finding her birth parents, Kay draws attention to these injustices and the great effect they had on many families.

Growing up in 1960s and 1970s Scotland was not easy for young Jackie, who often felt like an outsider. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay tells the story of her adoption and subsequent search for her biological parents, using self-representation to resist the racism she faced in Scotland. Many critics have regarded the tracing of Kay’s biological parents in *Red Dust Road* as the logical development ‘of a writer whose work is, to a significant extent, inspired by her own life story and characterized by an exploration of her multi-layered identity as the adopted mixed-race daughter of white Scottish parents.’⁷⁴ The adoptee identity Kay creates in her memoir is both fluid and intersectional, complicated by the effects of racism. Peter Clandfield argues that Kay’s ‘writings consistently and inventively underline the inextricability of racial issues from ones of gender, sexuality, class, and generation.’⁷⁵ In this section, I will investigate how Kay narrates her adoption story through memories, sketches, family trees, and evocation of the gothic to illustrate the complexity of identity and belonging.

⁷¹ Nicola Sturgeon, *Apology for historical adoption practices: First Minister’s Speech—22 March 2023* <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/apology-historical-adoption-practices-first-ministers-speech-22-march-2023/>> [accessed 06 June 2024].

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Tournay-Theodotou, ‘Exploring Displacement and Belonging with Jackie Kay’, pp. 83–4.

⁷⁵ Clandfield, p. 2.

As in *Red Dust Road*, most of Kay's work represents the voices of Black women who choose self-representation to define and resist white racism. For instance, the poem 'So You Think I'm a Mule', one of Kay's earliest works, published in 1984, opens with a question which haunts Kay's life in Scotland: 'Where do you come from?' This controversial question 'shows the white woman's view that the black woman is not British, let alone Glaswegian, someone who belongs - if at all - elsewhere.'⁷⁶ Kay has repeatedly recounted her personal struggles with such questions, asserting that she 'still ha[s] Scottish people asking [her] where [she is] from. They won't actually hear [her] voice, because they're too busy seeing [her] face.'⁷⁷ In *Red Dust Road*, Kay tells her life story and uses her own experiences to analyse notions of belonging and national identity, especially as they relate to adopted people, while affirming both her Scottishness and her blackness amid a mixture of imagination, anticipation, and nostalgic fantasy.

In *Red Dust Road*, Kay's narrative of her adoption includes many stories and memories, which complicate themes of identity, belonging, racism, and skin colour. Pamela Fox⁷⁸ and Pirjo Ahokas⁷⁹ argue, while discussing Kay's adoption story, that there is a distinction to be made between Kay's 'younger and older selves.'⁸⁰ In this section, I contend that by presenting her memoir in a fragmented, non-linear narrative, Kay blurs the lines of such distinction and shows how fluid and intersectional her identity is. The episodic structure of the narrative shows that Kay still cannot fully make sense of her life story and that her story is still without a clear ending. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay demonstrates that identity is never fixed and that life stories can be written and rewritten multiple times, or as Kay expresses it 'sketching over something that had already been sketched over before' (p. 48). Like sketches her identity narrative is constructed through episodes that are unfinished and are continuously rewritten again and again. Sketches suggest a temporary or provisional state, or, as Jeffery Rubbin-Dorsky argues, 'an unfinished production, the working-out of an

⁷⁶ Wendy Webster, 'Race, Ethnicity, and National Identity', in *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain: Social, Cultural and Political Change*, ed. by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 292–306 (p. 292).

⁷⁷ Jackie Kay in Libby Brooks, 'Don't Tell me Who I am', *The Guardian*, 12 January 2002 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jan/12/fiction.features>> [accessed 10 May 2022].

⁷⁸ Pamela Fox, 'The "Telling Part": Reimagining Racial Recognition in Jackie Kay's Adoptee Search Narratives', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9 (2015), 277–96.

⁷⁹ Pirjo Ahokas, 'Transracial Adoption, Memory, and Mobile, Processual Identity in Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road*', *Genealogy*, 7.4 (2023), 1–13.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 4.

idea rather than the idea itself'.⁸¹ Kay's use of literary sketches mirrors the way sketches were deployed during the peak of their popularity in the nineteenth century, to 'enable previously unheard voices to reach a wide audience'.⁸² Thus by presenting her work as overlaid sketches, Kay both emphasises the complexity and instability of identity and also highlights underrepresented voices in the Scottish literary scene through her adoption narrative.

These sketches are deeply connected to her mother's stories that are told multiple times and 'each time a new bit surfaces that [she] hadn't noticed before' (p. 16). Kay's sketches and fragmented memories are indicative of Michael Rothberg's depiction of remembrance as 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing', thus rendering these acts of memory as multidirectional.⁸³ Early in the narrative, when discussing her childhood, Kay states 'It suddenly occurred to me that the Indians are the same colour as me and my mum is not the same colour as me. I say to my mum, Mummy why aren't you the same colour as me? My mum says, Because you are adopted' (p. 12). Kay responds to her mother's declaration with the question 'Is this one of your stories?' (p. 13). This comment made by young Kay, alerts the reader that stories and storytelling occupy an important place in her narrative of adoption. John McLeod, in his book about transcultural adoption, argues that Kay 'finds in the productive agency of storytelling a way of crafting being from the painful possibilities of adoption's material fictionality'.⁸⁴ So, in Kay's narrative, stories are used to 'craft' or invent and reinvent multiple sketches of her identity that are facilitated by the endless possibilities adoption provides.

Stories are like sketches; both are layered over each other, and both have different forms and change over time. Kay explains that hearing her mother tell imagined stories about her birth parents using the little information they know about them demonstrates that 'the less you are given the more you can make up' (p. 34). The act of making stories up denotes again that adoption in itself forces the manifestation of different identities, rather

⁸¹ Quoted in: John Fagg, 'Stephen Crane and the Literary Sketch: Genre and History in "Sailing Day Scenes" and "Coney Island's Failing Days"', *American Literary Realism*, 38.1 (2005), 1–17 (p. 4).

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁸³ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

⁸⁴ John MacLeod, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 217.

than helping to create an identity. Kay continues to explain that 'once you make a story up, it is hard not to believe it yourself. We [adoptees] all do that' (p. 43). Through the act of sketching over, adoption is seen in an optimistic way as giving her the potential to alter and expand her identity.

The fact that young Kay comes to the realisation that she is adopted while watching 'the Indians' on TV highlights her sense of isolation in 1960s Scotland and shows the importance of imagination, family, and transcultural connection in the creation of a hybrid sense of self. Kay goes on to explain that, as an adopted person, these imaginary connections are more important than biological one's to her identity formation: 'It occurs to me that all anyone adopted really needs is a good imagination: more than genes or blood' (p. 149). Kay's comment shows the complex intersection between imagination, identity, and family. This is evident in the disappointment she feels when her image of a Black mother is shattered by the discovery of her real biological mother:

When I was a young girl, I used to imagine my birth mother was Shirley Bassey. Every time I watched her on telly singing "Goldfinger", I'd point my finger and shout, "That's her!" Then I found out that my birth mother was a white nurse from the Highlands and I was disappointed' (p. 65).

The gap between imagination and reality adds a new dimension to the narrative, leading Kay to the realisation that,

you cannot find yourself in two strangers who happen to share your genes. You are already made, though you don't properly know it, you are made up from a mixture of myth and gene. You are part fable, part porridge. Finding a strange, nervous, Mormon mother and finding a crazed, ranting, Born-Again father does not explain me. At least I hope not! (p. 47)

Kay challenges conventional and racial ideas about transcultural families. She states that she is shaped by the stories she heard from her adopted parents as she is by the genes she inherited from her birth parents. Kay shows that her identity is mediated through stories, myth, fable, and imagination rather than biological connections. She presents her connection to land (Scotland) through her adopted parents as more important to her identity formation than genes. In a sense, she defies the assumption that 'an original inheritance capable of bestowing identity must be presumed attached to humans from

birth',⁸⁵ by asserting that she is made of 'myth' and 'fable' that she inherited from her adopted parents. These personal myths are created mainly by her mother's stories, which helped create her sense of belonging and connectedness to Scotland.

'Myth' and 'fable' also carry the connotation of narrated stories, through time; stories that are layered as part of history and place. It gives the sense that encounters with the 'other' are instrumental to our understanding of identity, yet like myth and fable these identities are not fully graspable and 'others' can never be fully understood. Identity is open to other people to bring more depth and meaning to it. Just like the sketches Kay mentions earlier, identity is changeable and is traced differently through the account of others. Kay's realisation that her identity formation is far more complex and reaches beyond genetic inheritance is central to the narrative, as it brings to the surface a detrimental social fixation with origins and genes and its effect on the process of identity formation for adopted people. Since autobiographical narratives are often 'conceptualised as social and cultural' matters, it is important to understand Kay's story as both affecting and affected by the social context.⁸⁶ Thus, in narrating her adoption story, Kay is not interested in revealing herself but rather in constructing and understanding herself 'within the confines of social and linguistic conventions.'⁸⁷

The relationship between subjectivity and social conventions is also demonstrated in contrast between roots and routes that governs Kay's account of her adoption story. These contrasting concepts express the duality between one's past, biological origin, or beginnings (roots) and one's quests, choices, and memories (routes). In Kay's narrative, roots are linked with social and cultural perceptions of identity. She explains that, for many people, not knowing an adopted person's 'bloodline' indicates not knowing 'a lot about them',⁸⁸ leading those same people to conclude that adopted people 'have a false self'. She adds, 'Often people would even use that expression, don't you want to find out the missing pieces to your jigsaw?' (p. 193), emphasising the idea that her identity was missing or incomplete. Kay

⁸⁵ Margaret Homans, 'Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*: Transnational and Transracial adoption, Transgender Identity, and Fictions of Transformation', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 39.1 (2020), 123–50 (p. 125).

⁸⁶ Amal Treacher and Ilan Katz, 'Narrative and Fantasy in Adoption', *Adoption & Fostering*, 25.3 (2001), 20–28 (p. 22).

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 22.

⁸⁸ Kay, in Gish, 'Adoption, Identity, and Voice', p. 173.

has often expressed her aversion to such ideas, insisting that identity is more complex than biology and genes.

In the portrayal of her adoption story, Kay creates distinctions between biological, adoptive, queer, and elective family structures. In an interview for bookgroup.Info about *Red Dust Road*, Kay comments:

As a society we are very interested in tracing family trees through biology and genes. But there are other family trees that preoccupy me. My adoptive mum always told my brother and I the story of our adoption, and listening to her tell me stories was one of the things that made me a writer, because she has such a vivid and dramatic way of talking. It seems that the story itself was handed down, and that for my mum and me, stories being passed down are as important as blood and genes. *Red Dust Road* is really about what makes us who we are, nature, nurture. I think of myself as being made from a mixture of porridge and myth! I think that if I were making a family tree, it would have my adoptive parents on it and their parents too, and it would be more complicated and intricate than the straightforward biological blood line.⁸⁹

Kay's mention of different 'family trees that preoccupy' her, shows that she is not restricted to only one. She challenges the traditional structure of family trees and insists that she has full control of who should be included in her own family tree, whether based on genes, adoption or just personal choice. Kay's conceptualization of family trees as 'complicated and intricate' indicates the intangible interplay of intersectional markers of her identity like gender, race, and sexual orientation. Once again, Kay asserts that the bonds between her and her adopted family are built on imagination, memories, and stories. These stories serve as a basis for Kay's self-narration, they are her real inheritance, not genes. In a sense, her mother not only 'passed down' stories, but roots that ground her place in the world. So, instead of a traditional family tree that is rooted by genes, her tree is rooted by imagination that gave her full authorship of her life story.

Kay's mention of the concepts of 'nature and nurture' is deeply connected with the roots/routes dichotomy. She expresses an affinity for the idea of being consciously chosen by her adoptive parents. In the words of her adoptive mother, 'And you are special. You were chosen' (p. 13). Kay further emphasises this idea when discussing her and her

⁸⁹ Jackie Kay in a book group interview <<http://www.bookgroup.info/041205/interview.php?id=73>> [accessed 04 February 2022].

brother's adoption: 'In an imaginary way, the train stopped at us. We could have been picked up en route. We could have been from anywhere in the world' (p. 34). Routes are created by conscious actions, while roots are socially structured. Kay explains, however, that the idea of routes opens endless possibilities for adopted people and therefore leads to a sense that,

you could have been somebody else, that you could have led a completely different life, that you could have had a different name, you know, that you could have had different parents, a different house, different religious upbringing, political upbringing. Everything could have been different but for that moment in fate. So you have a sense of difference quite strongly.⁹⁰

The countless possibilities and the many unanswered questions it entails ultimately lead Kay to search for her biological parents. Although at the beginning of the story Kay destabilized or even denied the importance of the search for origins, she eventually confesses that her journey helped her realise a fuller sense of self.

The search for Kay's biological parents begins with meeting Elizabeth, her biological mother. However, that meeting only further confuses Kay, failing to create any connections or answer any questions. Kay experiences similar feelings when she meets her biological father, Jonathan. She explains, 'The whole business of being adopted seems on the one level to be a fantastic fiction. Something about it, even to you, seems fake [...] Yes, on some level it seems fabulously made up' (pp. 134–5). Kay's description of adoption as a 'fantastic fiction' is momentous. It comes as a contrast to the way she positions her mother's stories as her roots and her connection to both her family and her country. For Kay, her own adoption lacks these roots and lacks the reality presented through her mother's stories. Adoption is fictional in the sense that it is not grounded in experience, and it creates a sense of an imagined self. In Kay's point of view her biological parents are two strangers with whom she has no shared stories or experience. And since she constructs her identity by overlaying stories and sketching episodes, her meetings with her biological parents are presented as lacking these layers and thus pronounced as artificial and fake. An image of the artificiality of adoption can be seen when Kay meets her aunts and hears them call her Joy

⁹⁰ Kay in Gish, 'Adoption, Identity, and Voice', p. 172.

(the name on her birth certificate originally chosen by her birth father), she explains, 'It makes me feel like I always was somebody else after all' (p. 163).

In Kay's account, meeting her biological father and mother is not what she expected. The only resemblance she finds with them is on a physical and genetic level, such as having her mother's taste in flowers or her father's toes: 'My toes, I remember, are his toes' (p. 177). As she explained in an interview,

when you're adopted, I think you are quite curious to have somebody who is blood related to you, because you've not got anybody to compare yourself to. You haven't got a mirror, and people understand themselves by looking like their mum or their dad. So for me it was important to have a child in that way.⁹¹

Though Kay does not connect emotionally with her biological parents, she at least finds an answer to her curiosity regarding who she resembles physically.

However, the dislocation Kay feels does not stop her from embarking on a journey to find her ancestral village and trying to develop a deeper connection with her African roots, first established when she met her birth father. She makes it clear that she does not want to see her father again ('once is enough'), but is primarily interested in knowing her 'ancestral village' as a place of origin. Kay explains that she does not want to see her father because, '[My father] told me the only way he could possibly acknowledge me would be if I agreed to be born again' (p. 258). Kay's father's comment, although mainly presented in a religious sense, carries with it the connotation of rejecting one's past identity to start a new life, a concept that goes against Kay's vision of the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. When she rejects a connection with her father, she likewise rejects the idea of being twice born, a concept presented by Betty Jean Lifton in her autobiographical book, *Twice Born: Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter*. In her memoir, Lifton presents her adopted life as filled with loneliness and isolation, as an 'illusion'⁹² that can only be turned into reality through finding her origin. She explains that once an origin is found a real identity can be created, a

⁹¹ Jackie Kay interview with Paul Dalgarno, 'The Born Identity Interview: Writer Jackie Kay Explains How Adoption Shaped Her Life', *Sunday Herald*, 04 November 2007
<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/born-identity-interview-writer-jackie-kay/docview/331336053/se-2>> [accessed 26 January 2023].

⁹² Margaret Homans, 'Adoption Narratives, Trauma, and Origins', *Narrative (Columbus, Ohio)*, 14.1 (2006), 4–26 (p. 10).

conceptualisation that Kay refuses. Kay decides to make a roots trip to make 'origins seem knowable, memorable, documentable, yet again and again in the narratives of such journeys, origins are fictionally constructed in the face of admissions that they cannot otherwise be known.'⁹³ By writing her own story, she creates her own route into understanding and manifesting her identity, disproving the notion that she is missing pieces of herself.

The adoption narrative in *Red Dust Road* is told as a journey through family, memories, and connection with land and place:

My mum all those years ago sensed a child who had been adopted was also a child who could feel terribly hurt. And no matter how much she loved me, no matter how much my dad loved me, there is still a windy place right at the core of my heart. The windy place is like *Wuthering Heights*, out on the open moors, rugged and wild and free and lonely. The wind rages and batters at the trees. I struggle against the windy place. I sometimes even forget it. But there it is. I am partly defeated by it. You think adoption is a story which has an end. But the point about it is that it has no end. I keep changing its ending. [...] There's this ghostly something. I am only alone in the way that everybody is alone. And yet it seems that the bundle of child that is wrapped up in the ghostly shawl of adoption does have another layer of aloneness wrapped up in there. (pp. 45-6)

The mention of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) in such a context brings to mind the adopted child as an unsettling theme in many narratives and evokes the literary genre of the gothic. It invokes a literary tradition that is preoccupied by adoption and that connects adoptees to mystery, secrets, and supernatural existence. Heathcliff's feelings of anger, pain, cruelty, and loneliness, which almost destroy him and everyone around him, are deeply connected to his adoption. Likewise, Kay explains that the 'windy place right at the core of [her] heart' harbours the emotions of loneliness, hurt, and sadness that seem to be the inescapable inheritance of all adoptees. These emotions have 'ghostly' qualities, in the sense that they are hard to trace and understand. Also, ghosts are usually connected with fear of the unknown, the supernatural, secrets, and the past hunting the present. In a sense, adoptees live in fear of the unknown past, of revealing destructive secrets or, as Kay puts it, of causing the fire that 'will rage through the house till the whole place burns down' (p. 261). Also, the mention of ghosts relates to the way Kay describes her birth parents as

⁹³ Ibid, p. 4.

'ghosts one minute [...] and ordinary people the next' (p. 151). Adoption filled her life with uncertainty, and she feels hunted by the presence of her birth parents.

By placing her story in parallel to that of Heathcliff, *Jane Eyre* (p. 235), and other adoptees in literature, Kay evokes once more the power of stories and storytelling as a way of dealing with feelings of loneliness, trauma, and pain caused by adoption. Stories give her freedom to inscribe meaning to her mysterious past and connects her to other adopted people. By giving her story gothic qualities, Kay shows again that stories, myth, and imagination are important to her identity negotiation in *Red Dust Road*. 'The ghostly shawl of adoption' that she has been wrapped in since she was a child, connects Kay's story to the theme of haunted past, unfulfilled fantasies, and a sense of incompleteness while pursuing a dream of reunion with her unknown brothers and sisters. It shows how difficult it is to face the realities discovered during her search for her birth parent.

John MacLeod argues that for adopted people, the search for truth and reunion is an important part of 'reconditioning personhood.'⁹⁴ However, Kay's acceptance by her biological brother Sidney at the end of her journey to Nigeria makes her feel recognised, 'I feel a strange almost ecstatic sensation of recognition' (p. 272). She explains that after their short encounter at the New National Stadium in Nigeria, 'my world feels like it has expanded' (p. 275). She decides to mark this meeting by planting a Moringa tree which she brings back from Africa. The tree, with its African roots, planted in Kay's 'terrace house in Manchester, far away from its home' (p. 289), carries great significance. It demonstrates that roots, like people, create intimate connections. Kay has roots now; she is no longer hollow and lonely. Thus, root tracing is presented as an enriching process that adds dimensions to her identity and gives her new sense of recognition that was somewhat lacking in her connection to her African heritage.

Through her journey to her ancestral village, Kay attempts to identify new routes that can help her sketch a new chapter of her life. Kay explains that adoption involves acknowledging that 'the past is constantly open to dreams, imagination, fantasy, and interpretation. It's something that can be re-invented: the possibilities for the adopted

⁹⁴ Macleod, *Life Lines*, p. 210.

person to constantly re-invent themselves are endless.⁹⁵ In her relationship with her birth mother, Kay moves from a state of grieving ('It was like a kind of grief; only I'm not sure that I was grieving my birth mother, I think I was grieving the imaginary mother I'd had in my head' (p. 67)) to acceptance ('I like the idea of my mother born in this Highland town on the north-east coast of Scotland looking out to the North Sea, watching the great red skies deepen and slide away into themselves, the dark come down and fold up the waves until the sea looks like a ploughed field, until the sky and the sea become one, until everything that's been remembered has been forgotten' (pp. 161-2)). She also accepts that her African origins will always be an integral part of her identity: 'I've become so accustomed to reading everything in signs. I have done this all my life; but now that I'm in Nigeria, my obsession with what things mean suddenly seems to make sense, because everybody does it. It is an Igbo way' (p. 246). Like Rumi's story in *Gifted*, Kay's adoption story and her search for ancestral connection does not have a definite end. The hope and possibilities of reunion with her brother Sidney are made more prominent by Kay's mother dream near the end of the book of giving birth to a 'forty-five-year-old Nigerian son' (p. 284). The dream implies that Sidney would be accepted into their family and would be treated as a son. In *Red Dust Road*, Kay's assemblage of multiple sketches from her life allows her to create a narrative mode akin to sketching, in which her identity is always in flux and process. Her story, as well as her identity, is made up of different images, of sketches, that change, and shift focus every time they are narrated. Kay uses stories, imagination, and a connection to the gothic to dramatize the tension between these different sketches of her identity.

Borderline Identities and Contested Spaces in *Wish I Was Here*

Wish I Was Here (2006) is Jackie Kay's second collection of short stories, following *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (2002). In *Wish I Was Here*, Kay exhibits a sharp focus on voice. She presents twelve short stories that interweave the voices of various protagonists, mostly women, as they mediate the complexity of their identities while dealing with the ending of relationships. The fact that the stories in *Wish I Was Here* focus on personal relationships

⁹⁵ Kay in Gish, 'Adoption, Identity, and Voice', p. 174.

has caused a lack of critical interest in the collection. Many critics view *Wish I Was Here's* thematic focus as a contrast to Kay's other works. Michael Parker, in a book chapter published in the *Companion to The British and Irish Short Story*, argues that 'issues of race and identity are largely absent' from *Wish I Was Here*, as the collection mostly portrays 'individuals trying to cope with dissolved or dissolving personal relationships'.⁹⁶ Parker's argument is in accordance with Barbara Korte's theorization of Kay's short stories. Korte explains that the characters' experiences in most of Kay's short stories 'can never be attributed to their skin colour, gender, sexual orientation or Scottishness'.⁹⁷ In this chapter I aim to challenge both of these interpretations. I will show that issues of race, identity, Scottishness, and belonging are central to *Wish I Was Here*. By reading the collection alongside Kay's memoir, I will demonstrate how Kay maintains a sustained interest in the complexity of identity, even though her engagement with such issues is sometimes oblique and indirect in *Wish I Was Here*. Also, I will investigate how Kay cleverly employs imagery and formal choices to tackle the complexity of identity, belonging, race, and Scottishness. My engagement with Scottishness and national belonging, will build on Emma Young's and James Bailey's argument in *British Women Short Story Writers*, that 'the short story is an especially valuable literary vehicle for engaging with regional and national identities,'⁹⁸ especially when using ethnicity, gender, and sexuality as intersectional markers of identity.

Although Kay does not disclose place names and locations in most of the stories, in *Wish I Was Here*, Scotland is a central setting, just as in her earlier works. In the collection, Kay captures the diversity of Scotland by depicting a variety of voices from the Glaswegian woman who happened to be a spitting image of the Queen to multiple couples struggling to process their position both within their social and personal lives. The use of mirrors, foxes, and many other images that also feature in *Red Dust Road*, shows that identity, belonging, and re-imagining Scottishness is an integral part of the collection. In *Wish I Was Here*, each of the voices presents a different perspective on belonging to Scotland. For instance, in the first story in the collection 'You Go When You Can No Longer Stay' Ruth's dilemma seems to

⁹⁶ Michael Parker, 'Hybrid Voices and Visions: The Short Stories of E.A. Markham, Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Patricia Duncker, and Jackie Kay', in *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, ed. by David Malcolm (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), pp. 308–29 (p. 325).

⁹⁷ Korte, 'Speaking from Border Country', p. 216.

⁹⁸ Emma Young and James Bailey, *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Women to Now* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 6.

be that she is unable to conceive her identity away from Hilary and thus finds it difficult to accept the fact that Hilary no longer loves her. Throughout the story Ruth tries to rationalize Hilary's actions in order to deny that their relationship is over. 'Blinds' also depicts a woman who is unable to comprehend her life after separating from her partner. She still feels like she is 'play-acting' (p. 66) her new life. In 'My Daughter the Fox', issues of race, discrimination, and cultural isolation can be seen as factors that create complications. Remarkably the story seems to be based on Kay's dream of giving birth to a fox, which she narrates in *Red Dust Road* (pp. 91-92). The scenario, in a sense, is a wider metaphor for identity and belonging presented through the contradiction between the way Anya's mother celebrates and loves her daughter's difference and how society sees and fears her as 'other'. In 'The Mirrored Twins' Don and Hamish set out one day to see the mirrored twins, the mountains of Ben More and Stob Binnein. At the top of the mountain, they have a near death experience that makes them rethink their views about life.

The stories in *Wish I Was Here* explore the intersection between social norms and subjective manifestations of identity. David Paddy remarks that Kay 'attempts to show again and again in her work that identity is always at a crossroads of nation, race, gender, sexuality, and class, and that no person bears the privilege of being more pure than anyone else.'⁹⁹ Accordingly, Kay's stories suggest that people's wish to live or manifest their authentic self is usually undercut or undermined by powerful outside forces, usually in the form of social attitudes. These ideas are beautifully manifested through the characters' interactions with mirrors that are used as a framing imagery throughout the stories. Most of the stories in *Wish I Was Here* are written in the first person, which invites the reader to speculate about the protagonists' identity. Although some stories gradually reveal the identity of the characters, others leave their identities open to interpretation. By not fully revealing the identity of her characters, Kay skilfully suggests that Scotland is multicultural and made up of many voices. She also implies that national belonging should not be restricted to a certain racial identity, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.

As a genre, the short story has long been considered inferior to the novel and has therefore received less critical attention. Many critics discuss this argument, including

⁹⁹ David Ian Paddy, 'Jackie Kay', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, First published 11 December 2002 <<https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5158>> [accessed 09 August 2022].

Candia McWilliam, who writes in the introduction to *the Macallan/Scotland on Sunday Short Stories Collection*:

Short stories are shorter than novels and that's it. No proper writer approaches them as a thing to be dealt with frivolously, as it were, in the spare time left by a novel. Short stories are the repositories of life swiftly apprehended. Because they are short, they are often thought easy. There can be no more malicious misrepresentation.¹⁰⁰

Because of such views, critics have long overlooked the short story. This lack of critical attention is significant, because, as Clare Hanson claims, 'short stories are often concerned with the perspectives of those who are marginalised or possess an understanding which is in some sense uncomfortable or disturbing'.¹⁰¹ In *Re-Reading the Short Story*, Clare Hanson argues, 'The short story has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks – writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling "narrative" or epistemological/experiential framework of their society'.¹⁰² This tendency to use the short story genre to focus on underrepresented characters establishes common ground between Kay and many other Scottish writers, given the special place the short story occupies in Scotland's literary heritage. For Kay, as for Irvine Welsh, James Kelman, and A. L. Kennedy, 'the short story communicates the various minor narratives that are repressed and excluded by the imaginary unity of a community'.¹⁰³ Kay explains in an interview with Susanna Rustin, that the short story 'suits people who feel displaced or misplaced or who don't fit in, people who feel their very bones are lonely'.¹⁰⁴ By depicting the stories of such people in her short stories, Kay tackles and exposes social and cultural restrictions relating to belonging. The genre enables Kay to present many different voices while maintaining a focus on the themes of identity, language, and national belonging.

¹⁰⁰ Candia McWilliam, quoted in Aileen Christianson, and Alison Lumsden, eds., *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 156.

¹⁰¹ Clare Hanson, 'Postscript: British Women's Short Story Writing', in *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now*, ed. by Emma Young and James Bailey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 193–201 (p. 196).

¹⁰² Clare Hanson, *Re-Reading the Short Story* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 2.

¹⁰³ Gavin Miller, 'Scottish Short Stories (post 1945)', in *A Companion to the British and Irish Short Story*, ed. by Cheryl Alexander, Malcolm, and David Malcolm (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), pp. 294–307 (p. 304).

¹⁰⁴ Susanna Rustin, 'A life in Writing: Jackie Kay', *The Guardian*, 2012
<www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/27/life-writing-jackie-kay> [accessed 10 September 2022].

Scottish short story writers have been especially concerned with telling the stories of ordinary people who have been forgotten or marginalized within their own societies. As Douglas Dunn argues in his introduction to an anthology of Scottish short fiction, '[o]n the evidence of the Scottish short story there is a marked pull towards under-expressed, under-described lives'.¹⁰⁵ In an interview with J. P. O'Malley, Jackie Kay has explained that one of the things that has drawn her to the short story is the fact that it 'is concerned with outsiders who have slightly bleak lives, people who are caught in a moment of time on their own'. By presenting a variety of different voices in her short stories, Kay attempts to combat social injustices and question the limits of Scottishness and belonging. Furthermore, she feels the short story 'does seem to suit the solitary voice'.¹⁰⁶

However, in the introduction to *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories*, Emma Young argues that the conceptualization of the short story has changed, especially for women writers.¹⁰⁷ Young explains that in recent years female writers have received more critical recognition for their collections of short fiction and that short stories have become a 'useful literary vehicle for women writers'.¹⁰⁸ In Kay's work, along with a new generation of Scottish writers that includes A.L. Kennedy, Janice Galloway, and Ali Smith, the 'problematic notion of belonging, the ambivalent position of women within small nations and a particularly Scottish sense of alienation' emerge.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, there is an affinity between the genre of short story and marginal experiences, especially in connection to ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and belonging.

Kay's engagement with issues of Scottishness is also evident in the way she constructs ordinary, relatable characters. Kay's choice of ordinary, believable characters in her short stories can also be seen as a way of participating in a Scottish tradition of rendering 'actual events and persons' into 'permanent fictitiousness'.¹¹⁰ In 1946, Edwin Muir

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in: Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder, and Ruth Robbins, *The British Short Story* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 256.

¹⁰⁶ J. P. O'Malley, 'Profile: An Interview with Jackie Kay', *The Bottle Imp*, 15 (2014), <<http://asls.arts.gla.ac.uk/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue15/KayInterview.html>> [accessed on 20 June 2023].

¹⁰⁷ Emma Young, *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 1–21.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Monica Germana, 'Community Spirit? Haunting Secrets and Displaced Selves in Contemporary Scottish Fiction', in *Community in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. by Scott Lyall (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), pp. 235–54 (p. 152).

¹¹⁰ Douglas Dunn, *The Oxford Book of Scottish Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. IX.

argued, 'for its size, Scottish literature has created a greater number of characters (drawn from life) than any other literature in the world'.¹¹¹ In this context, Kay self-consciously uses the short story as another means of exploring her Scottishness and as a way of asserting her position as a black Scottish writer. However, the stories in *Wish I Was Here* combine the use of ordinary characters with recourse to fairy tales, myth, and imagination, a technique that is also used in *Red Dust Road* as explained previously. Incorporating otherworldly qualities into some of her stories suggests that identities are open to multiple interpretations and can never be fully understood. For instance, portraying the protagonist of 'My Daughter the Fox' giving birth to a fox and fully accepting her as her daughter shifts the story into the realm of the fantastic, implying that there are no absolute truths when it comes to understanding and interpreting identities.

In *Wish I Was Here*, Kay employs recurring images of the mirror that reflect the complexity of identity and her characters' unsettled relationship to Scottish society, which can be related to her own experience. In an interview with Petra Tournay-Theodotou, Kay uses the mirror imagery to explain that she can never separate herself from her cultural heritage:

I can keep looking in that reflective mirror and get not just myself back but other people too. Behind me there will be the reflection of my Nigerian grandmother, my Scottish grandmother. There will be all of these different refracted reflections that are interesting to me.¹¹²

The 'reflective mirror' is especially significant in the context of identity perception. For Kay it is not only the 'reflections' that are important, but also the 'refractions'. The phrase 'refracted reflections' shows that images do not only reflect through the mirror, but they also change, alter, and even distort as they pass through. When looking at the mirror people often do not only see a clear image of themselves, but also blurred images distorted by their fears, dreams, and cultural perception. Kay describes how acknowledging the different reflections and refractions in the mirror helped alter her perception of identity. These reflections created a connection between Kay and her cultural heritage, both in Nigeria and in Scotland.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. IX.

¹¹² Kay in Tournay-Theodotou, 'Exploring Displacement and Belonging with Jackie Kay', p. 93.

However, Kay's conceptualisation of the mirror as a symbol through which to understand her identity both as Scottish and as "other" brings to mind W. E. B. Du Bois idea of 'double-consciousness'. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois argues that identity for people from Black or ethnic backgrounds is affected by the 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in.'¹¹³ Similar to Kay's 'refracted reflection', Du Bois conjures the idea of division or separation of one's identity. People often feel the alienation of looking at themselves through the 'eyes of others' which prevents them from having a unified identity or a stable sense of self.

In this section, drawing upon Kay's connection to the 'different refracted reflections' in the mirror and Du Bois's metaphor of double consciousness as a means of conceptualising minority identities, I will argue that although the stories in *Wish I Was Here* are rooted partly in Kay's autobiography and her own experiences as an adopted, black Scottish writer, they transcend such specificity and explore the shifts and changes in identity construction. Characters in her stories are struggling between their internal experiences and their external reality and not only the fact that they are Scottish, black or adopted. I will analyse recurring imagery of mirrors and discuss how Kay uses such imagery to address questions of identity, inclusion, exclusion, home, and belonging. Kay deploys mirror imagery to unmask alternative identities for her protagonists and highlight the reflections of their cultural anxieties. Although the mirror imagery has long been used in literature, Kay's unsettling approach to mirrors challenges common understandings. I seek to unravel some of these complications and discuss the multiple ways in which the mirror can be used and understood. Sara Muñoz-Muriana explains that mirror imagery is often used to 'challenge cultural expectations'¹¹⁴ and social norms, especially when it comes to female identities. In *Wish I Was Here*, Kay uses the mirror as a framing imagery. Almost all the characters in the collection interact with mirrors in a way that reveals a part of their identity struggle, through which her characters are able to construct identities that are protected from social pressures and expectations. The mirror, in a sense, acts as a barrier and identities that are

¹¹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Sara Muñoz-Muriana, 'Veiling Bodies, Revealing Identities: The Mirror and the Construction of the Female Self in Eighteenth-Century Spain', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 45.1 (2016), 215–38 (p. 218).

constructed while looking at the mirror do not really exist beyond the interaction between person and object.

Psychoanalytical theories have attributed some parts of identity formation to children's ability to recognize themselves in the mirror during early childhood. Most of these theories are built on Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of the 'mirror stage'.¹¹⁵ Lacan explains that when looking at a mirror, a gap forms between the self and the specular self, leading to a mismatch between the two. Thus, interactions with mirrors are primarily built on fantasy and the illusion of similarity. They provide an image of only part of the reality. In what follows, I will discuss Kay's characters' interactions with mirrors and reflections to try to understand how such imagery illuminates the relationship between self-recognition and social realization. I will also discuss how Kay deploys the image of the mirror to uncover social misconceptions related to identity struggles.

In Kay's work, the mirror becomes a symbol of the inner struggle, between a sense of self-realization and social inclusion or otherness and marginalization. In 'My Daughter the Fox', the protagonist uses first-person narration to tell a magical story of giving birth to a fox, who she names Anya, and then having to give up her daughter, the fox, and 'let her out into the night' (p. 99). The story is strikingly similar to Kay's dream about the fox, narrated in *Red Dust Road*. The reuse of the image between the two works shows how Kay skilfully presents her readers with different versions of the same story, each time revealing different information, to challenge how they interpret her stories.

In *Wish I Was Here*, reflections and gazes convey the importance of the notion of the other in identity creation. The narrator, in 'My Daughter the Fox,' is only able to achieve full self-realization when seeing her own reflection in her daughter's eyes: 'When she looked at me and through me, I felt more understood than I have ever felt from any look by anybody' (p. 86). However, her newfound self-realization faces social scrutiny and a lack of acceptance of her daughter's difference: 'they were all shaking and quaking like it was the most disgusting thing they had ever seen' (p. 87). This accords with Scott Lyall's argument in *Community in Modern Scottish Literature* that to 'unveil the unsettling geographies' of their

¹¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror-Phases Formative of the Function of the I', *New Left Review*, 51 (1968), p. 71.

communities, writings by post-devolutionary Scottish writers often present characters who are 'unhomely, 'unfamiliar' and 'deviant'.¹¹⁶ Thus, the representation of Anya (the fox) explores how a community responds to any otherness or difference that might pose a threat to its sense of identity.

Anya's existence is met with fear and wariness from everyone, including the midwife at the hospital, the taxi driver, Anya's father, her grandmother, and even strangers. The narrator explains that the only place she and her daughter are truly happy is in the forest, away from people and their judgmental gazes:

On Sundays, I'd take her out to Epping Forest and she'd make me run wild with her, running through the lime trees and hornbeams, through beech trees and old oaks, chasing rabbits. The wind flew through my hair and I felt ecstatically happy. I had to curb the impulse to rip off my clothes and run with Anya naked through the woods. (p. 97)

However, the story does not have a happy ending, as Anya's difference becomes too overwhelming for her mother to handle alone. Thus, at the end, the narrator can no longer see her reflection in Anya's eyes and decides to let her go free: 'Her eyes looked dull and her ears weren't alert. She gave me a sad look that seemed to last an age' (p. 98). The mother's decision to let her daughter go 'out into the night' (p. 99) with the other foxes that 'want[ed] to claim Anya' (p. 98), although 'they looked strange and mysterious, different from Anya' (p. 99), can be interpreted as Kay's way of challenging social fixation with origins and pointing out that belonging should not be based on similarity or difference. At the beginning, Anya's mother celebrated her difference and wildness, but she later felt pressured by people's reaction to Anya and by the social process of 'othering' and decided to let her go. Thus, Kay cleverly employs the mother's gaze into her daughter's eyes as a play on the mirror metaphor to show how social pressure may cause people to lose sight of their true reflections.

Elsewhere in the collection, the emphasis on seeing oneself in the mirror conjures a sense of stasis and an inability to accept change. In 'You Go When You Can No Longer Stay' the narrator's encounters with the mirror are depleting rather than enlightening. The story is about Hilary and Ruth, and the breakdown of their twenty-five year relationship. In the

¹¹⁶ Scott Lyall, *Community in Modern Scottish Literature* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), p. 240.

story Ruth narrates how her lover, Hilary, started to drift away, leaving her 'to feel lonely inside [her] own life' (p. 9). Ruth observes how Hilary started to shop at Harvey Nichols instead of Marks and Spencer, to drink red wines instead to their usual bottle of white, and how she reads Martin Amis now. In the story similarity has a negative connotation when it comes to identity formation. The characters Hilary and Ruth have been in a relationship so long that for each woman, looking at the other is like 'looking in the mirror' (pp. 4-5), or as Ruth, the narrator, explains it: 'We look as if we could have knitted each other up, been in it so long we have grown to look the same, wear similar clothes and have almost identical expressions on our plain faces' (p. 3). In the story, Kay suggests that living in a society where everyone looks alike would be lacking and would make life dull. This demonstrates how 'Kay encourages her readers to embrace [multivalent difference] suggesting that it is a failure to acknowledge multiplicity, either in our selves or in our society, which is in fact the real ailment.'¹¹⁷ At the end of the story, Ruth explains that looking at her partner has become so tedious that all she hopes is that she can 'make it into bed and get [her] eyes shut without seeing a mirror' (p. 16). The mirror here reduces Ruth's whole experience to static moments of seeing. And instead of trying to deal with the reflection she sees in the mirror, Ruth chooses to ignore it.

Reflections in the mirror do not only carry negative connotations; they can also be advantageous. In 'The Mirrored Twins', we are presented with the idea of twinning and doubleness. In literature and in psychoanalytical readings, twins and doubles are usually associated with rivalry, narcissism, and wickedness, such as Esau and Jacob in the Bible, the doomed, incestuous twins in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', Rahel and Estha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and twins in Shakespeare (eg. *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy of Errors*). However, in 'The Mirrored Twins', Kay challenges these ideas by presenting twins as embodiments of the 'other' who is essential to self-creation. Don and Hamish are very different in terms of their characters and personalities, yet they physically resemble one another to the point that people think that they are 'brothers, even, sometimes, twins' (p. 187), thus they are 'the same the same, mirrors' (p. 199).

¹¹⁷ Lumsden, 'Jackie Kay's Poetry and Prose', p. 87.

What makes the story even more interesting is Kay's emphasis upon the idea of embracing one's differences and never feeling afraid of expressing one's inner identity. The story includes glimpses of Kay's own life story as she presents it in *Red Dust Road*. Don 'worked as a hospital porter at the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow' and he often encounters patients with 'shocking statements about asylum-seekers' and he would simply 'fall quite silent and wheel them to radiography' while wondering 'how many people kept bitter, rancorous ideas bubbling even when seriously ill' (p. 186). Similarly, Kay notes in *Red Dust Road* that when she worked as a porter in the hospital she had to 'wheel racist patients to have an X-ray' and often wondered 'what happens to people to fill them with an irrational fear and hatred of black people' (pp. 190-91). Christopher Whyte explains that writers like Kay, who feel displaced or alienated in Scotland due to race, origin, sexual orientation or place of residence, are usually faced with a dilemma: their characters can either 'stake out a place in the margins, boldly asserting [their] difference(s) in the face of a hostile society which alternatively trivialises and demonises', or they can 'sink [their] differences in the hope that the dominant culture will kindly overlook them'.¹¹⁸ However, Whyte's formulation is too simplistic when it comes to Kay's writings. Kay boldly asserts that Scotland is rife with difference and contradictions. She presents her protagonists in 'The Mirror Twins' as intertwined with each other and with the society they live in. They are not afraid of showing who they really are and celebrating their reflections through each other. In this sense, Kay pushes back against the boundaries and social restrictions imposed on identities.

Also, mirror imagery can be seen as a tool of self-reflection and is used to reveal insights about identity and belonging. Susan Ridley argues that 'the mirror reflects our deepest thoughts and fears about self, others, and the world in which we live',¹¹⁹ a conceptualization that is explored in 'Sonata'. 'Sonata' is the longest story in the collection and was published before the release of the collection as part of the Picador Shots series.¹²⁰ In the story Kay presents another type of mirror reflection: silence or the absence of voice.

¹¹⁸ Christopher Whyte, *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Susan Ridley, 'A Question of Identity: Mirrors as Tools for Self-Reflection', *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 10.2 (2015), 130–48 (p. 132).

¹²⁰ Picador introduced Picador Shots in 2006, a new series of pocket-sized, disposable books priced at £1. These Shots are designed to promote short stories and showcase the work of some of Picador's most renowned authors.

'Sonata' presents an interesting shift from a focus on visual reflections, to a focus on sound and voice. The narrator of the story is silent, by her own choice, and rationalises her silence as a way of allowing the voice of the 'other' to reflect through her. The story's overt concern with voice and sound is apparent from the title itself, which refers to a musical form in classical music. This interest in voice can be linked to Kay's depiction of language, accent, and tongue as markers of national belonging and cultural identity, discussed earlier in the chapter.

In a manner similar to *Red Dust Road*, and 'Why Don't you Stop Talking', the absence of voice in 'Sonata', along with the train's movement through different countries, can be theorized as representing an unstable sense of cultural identity and belonging. 'Sonata' represents an encounter between two strangers from Zagreb on a night train in Russia, a journey that has a 'surreal quality to it' (p. 143). Noticeably, 'Sonata' seems to be inspired by Kay's adopted mother's stories. Kay mentions in *Red Dust Road* that growing up she has been fascinated by her mother's narration of the 'epic journey, of those young people meeting on a train heading for Moscow' (p. 33). This connection shows Kay's sustained interest in depicting similar themes in her writing. For instance, Kay continuously stresses the complexity and fluidity of identity and rejects binaries; the narrator in 'Sonata' expresses her discontent that 'we break the world up into opposing groups the whole time, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the black and the white, men and women' (pp. 164-65).

In 'Sonata', during the train journey the narrator listens to Esther's, a stranger she has just met, tale of how her love story, with Anna, ended, leaving her heart broken and unable to start a new life. The narrator is not identified and does not reveal any information about herself. At the beginning of the story, the narrator establishes the overarching theme by remarking that, 'The dark is like a mirror' (p. 143) and later explaining that 'in a way, she [Esther] is talking to the dark. In a way I am her mirror' (p. 168). The narrator becomes so enchanted with this stranger and is afraid to talk or disrupt her story to the point that her 'eyes felt sore from looking into the dark and trying to fathom it' and Esther's 'voice was now inside [her] head. It seemed to go with the snow and the dark' (p. 159). The narrator's own voice is completely demolished and is replaced by Esther's voice, which can be seen as a play on social discrimination, when one voice is louder than the other, the latter will be

forced into silence. The narrator even starts reflecting on her identity and moves from doubting herself – ‘I went to the bathroom and took a good look at myself in the mirror. What had I had by ways of lovers? How was I qualified to even understand the complexities that I was hearing? What if her entire story was made up and she had picked me to make a fool of me?’ (p. 167) – to feeling ‘safe and contained by a stranger in a carriage on a train’ (p. 157). Here private interaction with the mirror is used to negotiate her relationship to the ‘other’ and to reflect her fears and insecurities. Similarly, Esther narrates how when she suspected that her partner, Anna, was having an affair with Isadora, she ‘went to [her] bathroom and stared at [herself] in the mirror. [she] felt like [she] was climbing down the stairs of [her] love, and that when [she] got to the bottom [she] would be lost.’ (p. 171). The idea of the stranger in their relationship caused her to face her fear of being lost without Anna’s love as encapsulated in this interaction with the mirror imagery.

In the story, Esther only shares her story with the narrator when they are completely alone in the train carriage. Their interaction, like Kay’s representations of encounters with mirrors, is private and is only interrupted by the presence of other passengers, ‘At this point an old man came into our carriage and sat down [...] I knew you might not speak now’ (pp. 149–50), ‘You rolled your eyes when the men came in’ (p. 157). Acknowledging the strangers as a threat to these interactions proves that they are culturally determined, and that Esther and the narrator are only able to connect to each other when they are free from the distorting influence of external social factors. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Esther is telling a queer love story between two women and that all the strangers who interrupt her story and force her into silence are men. Thus, the story can be read as a search for belonging and acceptance and a fight against social injustices. Also, repeated reference to the windows conjures the idea of the glass acting as a shield, as seen in Rumi’s story in chapter One of this thesis, from the threats of the outside world and enhancing their private interactions away from the judgment of others. The narrator of the story explains, ‘You had opened your eyes and were staring out of the window again [...] You gave me the impression that you might just abandon it altogether and fall as silent as the faithful snow outside.’ (pp. 159-60), and ‘You look out of the window. You have lapsed into one of your small silences’ (p. 165), which hints at the difficulty of fighting against reigned social constructs and outdated ideas. The fact that the narrator is as silent as a mirror reflection

and that she is constantly afraid that Esther will fall into silence again can be seen as a manifestation of dislocation and alienation from her own social surroundings and fear of being judged by outsiders. The presentation of the silences as only small and short lived, implies that the fight against outdated social constructions will not stop for long and will continue till change is achieved. Kay's journey in the fight against social injustices and discrimination in Scotland is long standing and personal, one of the reasons Kay left Scotland and moved to England is that she is a lesbian. However, by making the statement that 'journeys must come to an end' and 'the arrival [is] inevitable, unavoidable' (p. 177), the story suggests a hopeful vision of changing the society's intolerance towards diversity and its perception of national belonging.

In *Wish I Was Here*, mirror imagery can also be understood as a tool for self-scrutiny. In 'Not the Queen', mirror's reflections are deceptive, they show 'that people cannot truly fathom, much less ultimately control, the way others read them'.¹²¹ Perceived or surface identity might not align with the way individuals experience and understand themselves; nevertheless, it marks and distinguishes them as other. Kay presents the story of Maggie Lockhart, a woman who feels trapped in someone else's life, because she happens to resemble the Queen. She has 'spent her life trying to work out what she'd done to deserve' being a spitting image of the Queen. Margaret feels trapped inside her body and is unable to shake the idea that everyone is friends with her because of her resemblance to the Queen. When looking in the mirror, Maggie, cannot see herself and is overwhelmed by a strange feeling, 'she had the odd feeling when she glance[s] in the mirror that she wasn't seeing herself, but the bloody Queen' (p. 115). The story demonstrates that reflections in the mirror can cause a sense of dislocation. Through Maggie Lockhart's alienation, Kay tackles the issue of authorship and taking control of one's life as well as the effect that misrecognition by others can have on a person's life. Kay is known for her use of unexpected storylines to encourage her readers to reconsider their positions on familiar themes like identity, love, and relationships, as well as her 'willingness to introduce uncomfortable

¹²¹ Victoria R. Arana, 'Clothing the Spirit: Jackie Kay's Fiction from *Trumpet* to *Wish I Was Here*', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 20.3 (2009), 250–61 (p. 251).

topics of public interest'.¹²² In 'Not the Queen', Kay uses humour to tackle the effect of social scripts on identity formation.

Kay's use of the mirror motif as a way of exploring social scripts and how they cause estranging or constantly changing images of the self is apparent in 'Blinds'. The protagonist of the story is a lonely woman who has just separated from her long-term partner and moved into a new house. This unnamed woman is overwhelmed by all the decisions she needs to make, such as the colour of the kitchen blinds, the type of floor tiles, or the hall carpet. The story is constructed around a long conversation she has with 'the blind man' (p. 65), who has come to fit her kitchen blinds. The woman feels too exposed because her neighbour keeps waving, which she finds 'disconcerting' (p. 65). Also, she is so afraid of seeing her own reflection that she decides to cover all her windows. She struggles with loneliness and the fear of being judged by outsiders. Her feelings of helplessness and the loss of control over her life are strongly shown through her decision to shut herself away from the judgemental gaze of the outside world. Kay's protagonist's wish to isolate herself can be interpreted as a subtle critique of the self-enclosed, racialised Scottish society.

Kay's exposure of social restrictions on belonging is apparent in 'Pruning'. The story begins with the protagonist looking at her own 'face in the mirror' and wondering if she is in 'the wrong country' (p. 130). What makes this story even more interesting is the clear reference to the protagonist's skin colour, 'My black skin looked dusty' (p. 130). She looks at her 'tiny mirror' and thinks about how living in England makes her feel 'homesick for [a] country [she] had only ever been in four times' and wonder if she 'might feel more comfortable there, less visible' (p. 131). Here the encounter with the mirror affords an opportunity to explore the effect of social scripts and to express identity ambivalence. The protagonist's ambivalence can be linked to Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. The fact that she wishes to be 'less visible' highlights the divisions or refractions of her identity. She feels 'lonely' (p. 131) and alienated within her own cultural surroundings.

¹²² Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'Bards and Radicals in Contemporary Scottish Poetry: Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay, and an Evolving Tradition', in *Roots and Fruits of Scottish Culture: Scottish Identities, History and Contemporary Literature*, ed. by Ian Brown and Jean Berton (Edinburgh: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2014), pp. 54–64 (p. 59).

Kay's mirror imagery is extremely suggestive. The recurring images are ambiguous and complex, and they invite interpretations of the stories as connected to ideas of Scottishness, belonging, and identity. The characters' interactions with mirrors show the complexity of identity and the struggle to belong. The way the stories in *Wish I Was Here* depict different, diverse people interacting with the mirror is a reflection of the depth and complexity of Scottish national identity. However, the fact that the narrators never reach fulfilment also implies that identities, like mirror reflections, are not entirely knowable. This idea of a partial understanding of identity brings us back to Rushdie's concept of broken mirrors, which I discussed in the introduction. In his essay, 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie explains that humans are:

Cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death.¹²³

Construction of identity is based on an incomplete perception - cracked lenses - of life events. Throughout their lives, people strive for full understanding and coherence by attempting to piece together images through those cracked lenses. By deploying the imagery of the mirror, Kay presents a conception of identity parallel to that of Rushdie. She presents her characters as having partial understanding of their identity based on the 'refracted reflections' she describes in her interview with Petra Tournay-Theodotou. Therefore, the characters' longing for belonging and a sense of wholeness is never fulfilled.

Although Kay's characters are distinct and present diverse experiences and interactions, most of them are connected to Scotland, either through descriptions of landscape or the use of Scots dialect. For example, 'How to Get Away with Suicide' is set in Glasgow and is preoccupied with space. In it, Malcolm shows a deep attachment to the Glasgow streets and the memories they carry of his past life. Depicting Glasgow as a space inhabited by struggling and complicated characters recalls James Kelman's Glasgow fiction. Kelman has commented in the essay 'The importance of Glasgow in My Work': 'I wanted to

¹²³ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta in Association with Penguin, 1991), p. 12.

write as one of my own people, I wanted to write and remain a member of my own community'. Similarly, for Kay, the depiction of Scottish places demonstrates that she is 'rooted in Scottish culture'.¹²⁴ In 'The Mirrored Twins', for instance, the two protagonists feel as if the Scottish landscape is 'mapped out on their own bodies' (p. 184), thus asserting that they have the right to claim full belonging to Scotland. In 'My Daughter the Fox', Scotland's landscape is depicted as a source of safety and happiness. Although their home is in southeast England, the narrator decides to go 'to the north of Scotland and release her' because 'Anya would be safe and happy [there]' (p. 94). In 'You Go When You Can No Longer Stay', Ruth rethinks her attachment with the Scottish landscape after her partner decides to end their relationship, as she remembers their favourite walks 'just below Beinn Mhor, and the lovely waterfall in the woods up the hill from the old sheep fanks' (p. 14). Also, in 'Wish I Was Here', the narrator explains that one of her best memories was when she and her friend went in a 'trip to the Isle of Mull' (p. 33). Through these images of landscape, the collection can be connected to Scotland.

It is not only through her representation of the landscape that Kay suggests that these stories are concerned with Scottishness, but also the use of Scots dialect. In her short stories 'Kay's use of Scottish dialect and idioms for some of the narrator figures gives authenticity and works in tandem with the focus on black identity'.¹²⁵ Emma Young, on the contrary, argues that Kay's use of 'regional dialect' interferes with the reader's interaction with the text and 'distance[s] the reader from the text by slowing down the reading process'.¹²⁶ However, I believe that such words add richness and complexity to the text and challenge the reader's understanding of identity and belonging. For instance, Kay invites the reader to engage more deeply with the characters by choosing to reveal that the protagonist in 'Pruning' has a 'black skin' (p. 130) but no distinctive accent, while highlighting the heavy Scottish accent of the characters in the story that carries the name of the collection, 'Wish I Was Here', without giving any hints about their ethnicity. Thus, Kay renders the short story as a useful tool of negotiating specific Scottish national identity and belonging.

¹²⁴ Parker, 'Hybrid Voices', p. 326.

¹²⁵ Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder and Ruth Robbins, *The British Short Story* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 248.

¹²⁶ Young, *Contemporary Feminism*, p. 33.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to present a new reading of Kay's memoir, *Red Dust Road*, and her collection of short stories, *Wish I Was Here*. I have tried to give a new critical perspective by highlighting how these two works complicate each other by tackling similar themes and images. The two works have been perceived by critics as dealing with different themes, and thus have not been studied side by side before. In this chapter, I have shown that recurring images and motifs in the two works, such as mirrors, foxes, fables and myths, connect them and demonstrate that both works deal with issues of race, belonging, and Scottishness. In *Red Dust Road* and *Wish I Was Here*, Kay's isolation and her awareness of being different in Scotland has led her to experiment with form and voice as a way of depicting identity struggle and challenging dominant culture. In a chapter titled, 'Who Needs Identity', Stuart Hall argues that identities are constructed 'through, not outside difference',¹²⁷ which leads to the realization 'that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the "positive" meaning of any term - and thus its "identity" - can be constructed'.¹²⁸ In an interview with Tanika Gupta about the adaptation of *Red Dust Road* for the theatre, Kay has explained that most of her work is powered by her wish to instigate social and political change in Scotland and she continues to say that 'it is interesting to see how the country [Scotland] is changing in front of your eyes'.¹²⁹ In this chapter I have shown how Kay's fluid understanding of identity and her journeys of discovery 'require novel reading strategies, attuned to the multiformity of storytelling and to the interlacing of voices, places and identities.'¹³⁰

In *Red Dust Road* and *Wish I Was Here* Kay uses her own story and experiences as a starting point to explore the complexity of intersectional identities and to question the

¹²⁷ Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall, and Gay, Paul du (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), p. 5.

¹²⁸ Ibid, pp. 5–6.

¹²⁹ Jackie Kay speaks to Tanika Gupta at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, 2019. Available at <<https://www.edbookfest.co.uk/media-gallery/item/jackie-kay-speaks-to-tanika-gupta-at-the-edinburgh-international-book-festival>> [accessed 10 October 2022].

¹³⁰ Pietra Palazzolo, "'Tell[ing] One Story in Place of Another": Journeys of Discovery in Jackie Kay's Autobiographical Prose and Poetry, in *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction*, ed. by Lucia Boldrini, and Julia Novak (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 105–26 (p. 122).

problematic boundaries of belonging in Scotland. Pietra Palazzolo specifies that Kay's emphasis "on memory and recollection shows how personal and public discourses are intertwined".¹³¹ I have argued in this chapter that Kay's focus on Scottishness and national belonging illustrates how she uses her memoir and the short story genre to challenge 'metropolitan cultural hegemony',¹³² that prevailed in the 2000s.

The thematic and formal similarities between *Red Dust Road* and *Wish I Was Here* highlights Kay's continued interest in identity and reimagining futures of belonging to Scotland. For instance, when talking about her life story, Kay has said that she often struggles with her reflection in the mirror, a theme that also preoccupies *Wish I Was here*, as discussed above. Kay explains in *Bessie Smith* that:

I am not the same colour as my mother, my father, my grandmother, my grandfather, my friends, my doctor, my dentist, my butcher, my teacher, my headmaster, my next door neighbour, my aunt, my uncle, my mother's friends, my father's friends. The shock of not being like everyone else; the shock of my own reflection came with the Blues. My own face in the mirror was not the face I had in my head.¹³³

Kay's repeated use of mirror imagery, as in this quotation, invites various interpretations and engages the reader more deeply with characters. *Red Dust Road* and *Wish I Was Here* reflect Kay's interest in the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. In both works, Kay negates simple understanding of identity to defy assumptions about belonging, identity, and Scottishness.

Brexit Postscript: Trauma, Borders, and Migration in Kay's poetry collection *Bantam*

Jackie Kay's poetry collection *Bantam* (2017) emerges as a powerful response to the political and social fractures caused by Brexit. The collection grapples with anxieties surrounding national identity, migration, and the exclusionary rhetoric that defined the UK's decision to leave the European Union. In the collection, Kay weaves personal history with public

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 111.

¹³² Liggins, Maunder and Robbins, p. 256.

¹³³ Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Bath: Absolute, 1997), p. 9.

narratives, reflecting on Britain's shifting attitudes toward immigration, race, and national belonging.

Following the Brexit vote, Jackie Kay expressed a profound sense of unease, stating: 'for the first time in my adult life, I don't feel safe' living in England.¹³⁴ The political shift and the surge in xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment it seemed to unleash left her feeling unsettled and alienated in England. The growing atmosphere of intolerance compelled her to seriously consider relocating back to Scotland - a place she originally left because she did not feel accepted as she recounts in her memoir *Red Dust Road*.

Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first Minister 2014- 2023, expressed concern that the vote to leave the European Union had pulled the UK back into a bygone era marked by racism and intolerance. Sturgeon, who wrote the introduction to *Red Dust Road*, revealed that, following the referendum result, she reread Kay's memoir and was struck by how the author's accounts of the racism she experienced in the 1980s 'felt a bit too current.'¹³⁵

As mentioned in the thesis introduction, in 'Poets on Tour: Reeling After the Referendum' in 2016 Kay described the Brexit result as 'a trauma. A body blow to the country' and expressed her astonishment at the rise of xenophobic rhetoric: 'The biggest surprise is that none of us saw this juggernaut of racism approaching. It is coming down the main roads and the slip roads and even beautiful country lanes at huge astonishing speed. We have to stop it. We cannot wait to cross the border. We cannot wait to feel at home'.¹³⁶ *Bantam* can be seen as Kay's poetic response to the social and emotional confusion of the post-referendum period, an effort to confront collective trauma and reimagine belonging. Through her poems, Kay seeks to cultivate both personal and communal spaces where people in Britain might reclaim a sense of home—spaces that are not defined by fixed borders, but by the very fluidity and openness of crossing them. In this vision, "home"

¹³⁴ 'Makar Jackie Kay says Brexit vote could force her to quit Manchester home for Scotland', *The Herald*, 10 July 2016, <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14609490.makar-jackie-kay-says-brexit-vote-force-quit-manchester-home-scotland/>> [accessed 19 April 2025].

¹³⁵ In: 'Nicola Sturgeon fears Brexit vote has fuelled racist attacks', *The Herald*, 19 August 2016, <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14692110.nicola-sturgeon-fears-brexit-vote-fuelled-racist-attacks/>> [accessed 15 April 2025].

¹³⁶ Jackie Kay, 'Poets on Tour: Reeling After the Referendum', *The Guardian*, 2 July 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jul/02/poets-tour-reeling-after-the-referendum>> [accessed 12 January 2024].

becomes an act of connection and resistance, rather than a static or exclusionary place. Therefore, *Bantam* is Kay's way of resisting division. In the collection Kay frequently deploys the metaphor of the body and connects home with movement and border crossing to critique the ways in which Britishness is constructed through racialized narratives.

Most of the poems in the collection depict loss and mourning through the voices of children, parents, and grandparents. The best-known poem in the collection is 'Threshold', which she first recited in 2016 at the opening of the Scottish Parliament, and which begins with 'let's blether about doors. / Revolving doors and sliding doors; / Half-opened, half-closed: / The door with your name on it'.¹³⁷ The shutting of the door symbolises the racist politics around immigrants reinvigorated by Brexit and Britain's decision to close its borders. Kay acknowledges the persistent closures in British society, particularly for asylum seekers, writing: 'The painted red for asylum seeker. / The X that says Plague or Passover'.¹³⁸ However, the poem ultimately embraces a sense of welcome, listing greetings in multiple languages, including Hindi, Cantonese, Punjabi, French, Spanish, Polish, German, Gaelic, and Scots. By doing so, Kay challenges the racist rhetoric underpinning Brexit and advocates for a Britain that celebrates multiculturalism.

Kay's rejection of the restrictions placed on immigrants and refugees is also reflected in a poem titled 'Planet Farage', a reference to Nigel Farage, who led the UK independent party until 2016 and is described as the face of Euroscepticism,¹³⁹ in which Kay writes, 'We closed the borders, folks, we nailed it. [...] / We shut it down! No immigrants, no immigrants. / No recycling global-warming / nutters. / Little man, little woman, the world is a dangerous place. / Now, pour me a pint, dear. Get out of my fracking face'.¹⁴⁰ This satirical tone links Brexit's anti-immigration rhetoric to a broader politics of denial and nostalgia for an idealized, isolationist Britain. The poem exposes the narrow-mindedness of Brexit-era nationalism and reflects Kay's refusal to accept Britain's decision to leave the EU. In an

¹³⁷ Jackie Kay, *Bantam* (London: Picador, 2017), p. 15.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ See: 'The Nigel Farage Story', *BBC news*, 4 July 2016 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-36701855>> [accessed 01 September 2024].

¹⁴⁰ Kay, *Bantam*, p. 57.

interview shortly after the publication of *Bantam*, Kay, speaking about Brexit, said that ‘I keep thinking we are going to wake up and find it’s all been a horrible mistake’.¹⁴¹

Kay’s *Bantam* aligns with a broader literary movement that emerged in response to Brexit. As Shaw notes, Brexit literature, or ‘BrexLit,’ has become a key cultural space for interrogating Britain’s post-referendum identity.¹⁴² Many post-Brexit literary works, like Ali Smith’s Seasonal Quartet, respond to the referendum with anger, satire, or despair. Future research can highlight these responses especially in connection to writers from the devolved nations of Britain.

In Kay’s works discussed earlier in the chapter, she frequently employs bodily imagery to explore themes of national identity, exclusion, and belonging. In *Bantam* the body becomes the site where political and social tensions are played out. Miguel Mota argues that *Bantam* continues Kay’s long-standing critique of Margaret Thatcher’s policies, which she sees as laying the groundwork for the racialized discourse surrounding Brexit.¹⁴³ Thatcher’s infamous warning that Britain was being ‘swamped by people with a different culture’¹⁴⁴ resurfaces in the Brexit-era anxieties about immigration, borders, and belonging.

Thatcherism’s vision of the nation was one of control, exclusion, and sanitization. It constructed a fantasy of British identity that depended on othering racialized, foreign, queer, and working-class bodies. Kay’s poetry dismantles this logic by writing the ‘abject body’¹⁴⁵ back into the centre of national identity—demonstrating that what Thatcherism sought to exclude is, in fact, constitutive of British life.

In *Bantam*, Kay’s defiance of such ideas is enacted through a series of poems that foreground the embodied experiences of those on the margins. Poems like ‘Constant’ and ‘Push the Week’ depict the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in Brexit Britain, highlighting their struggles with surveillance, displacement, and social erasure. ‘Constant’, for instance, is

¹⁴¹ In: Louise Rhind-Tutt, ‘Jackie Kay on 2017’, *INews*, 28 November 2017 <<https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/people/jackie-kay-interview-2017-mistake-106505>> [accessed 10 August 2024].

¹⁴² Kristian Shaw, *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 167.

¹⁴³ Miguel Mota, “‘We Cannot Wait to Feel at Home’: Jackie Kay, Thatcherism, Brexit”, *Contemporary Literature*, 62.4 (2022), p. 477.

¹⁴⁴ Margaret Thatcher, TV Interview for Granada World in Action (‘Rather Swamped’). 27 Jan. 1978. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485>.

¹⁴⁵ See Mota, pp. 478-480.

narrated in the second person, immersing the reader in the claustrophobic and relentless presence of a silent, invisible entity 'it' that dominates every aspect of the speaker's life. This 'it' is never named but gradually revealed as a metaphor for the anxiety, trauma, and dehumanization experienced by individuals navigating hostile immigration systems. 'It' infiltrates the body, the voice, and the very identity of the speaker:

You are imprisoned in your own life.
Every time you go to the Home Office, there it is.
They make you feel inhuman [...] It is always there. Constant.
It is your only companion. There is no freedom.
You can't really describe it.
It gets everywhere. It gets in your hair.¹⁴⁶

These themes echo Kay's earlier work, which explores racialized identity, hybridity, and the tensions between personal and national belonging. Together, these works explore how identity is shaped by public discourse and often performed under social pressure.

While some poems in *Bantam* are overtly political, many explore familial intimacy and personal memory as counter-narratives to nationalist discourse. These poems seem to assert everyday life as a site of resistance. In 'Diamond Colonsay', for instance, Kay captures a tender, intimate moment between her aging parents. In the poem, the speaker descends the stairs at Glassard only to overhear a simple but profound exchange: '*I love you John Kay / I love you Helen Kay.*' (italicised in the original).¹⁴⁷ At the opposite end of the life cycle, 'Welcome Wee One' celebrates new beginnings with the birth of a child. It reads like a lyrical blessing, filled with warmth and wonder: 'O ma darlin wee one / The hale world welcomes ye: / The mune glows; the hearth wairms.'¹⁴⁸ Here, Kay welcomes new life not only into a family but into the embrace of the wider world, infusing the moment with both personal and communal joy.

In 'Bantam', the title poem, Kay threads together the voices and memories of three generations—her own, her father's at 87, and his father's at 17—to explore how the body carries the weight of history across time. Kay shows how physical trauma endures: her

¹⁴⁶ Bantam, p. 58.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 9.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

father's wartime weight loss, his imprisonment, and the startling emergence of Somme shrapnel from his arm years later become symbols of the body's long memory. The poem becomes a meditation on inheritance, resilience, and the quiet way the body records and reveals the past: 'As a prisoner, my faither's weight fell. / And years later, the shrapnel fray the Somme / Shot oot, a wee jewel hidden in his left airm.'¹⁴⁹

Similar to *Red Dust Road* and *Wish I was Here*, Kay uses mirror imagery in 'Moss Side Mirrors' to reflect identity struggle within a Manchester seniors' recreation centre. The poem turns its gaze toward the bodies of older women as they swim and dance—engaging in acts of joyful movement that allow them to reconnect with versions of their younger selves. These are not idealised bodies, but lived-in ones that carry history, strength, and grace. The mirror becomes a central image through which time folds back on itself. As the speaker observes: 'Now you wind down, slowly, slowly, take your time, understood, / Till you meet yourself coming back, / That girl, who thought much more was at stake, / That things you cared for would always break.'¹⁵⁰ Here, the mirror doesn't just reflect the present self—it also brings into view the past, allowing the women to see who they were, who they've become, and how far they've come. The mirror thus becomes both a literal and metaphorical space where identity is not fractured by age but made more complete through reflection and memory.

Ultimately, *Bantam* carries forward Kay's mission of exposing and challenging the exclusionary rhetoric in Britain and more specifically in Scotland. Through personal memory, performance, and satire, she presents an alternative vision of British identity—one that embraces contradiction, celebrates hybridity, and foregrounds acceptance over rigid definitions of belonging. Future research might further investigate how Kay's work intersects with broader ideas of national identity and belonging in post-Brexit Britain, especially in connection to Scotland.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 61.

Chapter Three

'I lost my reference': Agency, Mobility, and Identity in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

Introduction

In this chapter, I will investigate Chinese-British writer, Xiaolu Guo, as an author who migrated to Britain in adulthood rather than one who was born or grew up there, as in the cases of Nikita Lalwani and Jackie Kay. I will explore how Guo presents through her work a reconfigured British identity, complicated by the fact that English is not a mother tongue for either the author or her protagonists. Guo often depicts her protagonists as searching for their own distinct voices while struggling to navigate their individuality amid different languages and cultural backgrounds. The discussion will mainly focus on Xiaolu Guo's 2007 novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*,¹ which follows a year in the life of a Chinese student, Zhuang or Z, who comes to London to learn English. I argue that Guo employs language creatively to explore the challenge of coming to terms with and voicing her protagonist's cultural identity as a student living in London.

In this chapter Guo's decision to use 'broken English' instead of standard British English will be investigated in relation to her reworking of the myth of Pygmalion, her representation of the body, and the consideration of London and Britishness in relational terms (especially in the context of Z's travel across Europe). The chapter's main critical interventions are twofold. First, it focuses on Guo as a writer who belongs to an ethnic minority that is rarely read in connection to Britishness and Englishness. Secondly, it examines *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*'s representation of a multicultural British identity that moves away from a focus on the English metropolitan society that is so prominent in popular literary fiction about migration published in the 2000s. The chapter examines how Guo resists concepts of Euroscepticism and English exceptionalism through her focus on Europe, which comes in opposition to a narrow focus on commonwealth or

¹ Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (London: Vintage, 2007).

Empire seen in some critically and publicly acclaimed works published at the turn of the millennium.

My readings in this chapter attempt to piece together Guo's rather fragmented text and to highlight its creativity and depth of insight. The chapter is divided into four sections, each of which investigates a distinct theme or idea, but they all connect through a sustained interest in identity, language, and belonging to Britain. The first section examines the protagonist Z's struggle with learning English and how this struggle obscures her identity and her connection to both Britain and her home country, China. Z's struggle to learn English is further complicated by Guo's engagement with the Pygmalion myth, investigated in the second section. We see how Z uses her writing to gain more agency and become a more dynamic artist, while her English lover is turned into a static sculptor, thus reversing the Pygmalion myth in which the male sculptor falls in love with a sculpture he has carved. The third section depicts Z's movement and her travels to Wales and Europe as a way of easing her identity struggle. These travels facilitate the creation of a cosmopolitan identity and help change her view of London. During these trips, Z is able to explore her creativity by remapping of the borders of Europe. In the last section, recurring imagery of fragmented bodies are investigated as an articulation of Z's identity struggle and her attempts to deal with displacement in Britain. This chapter examines Guo's creative use of language and her engagement with Britishness in a way that expands our understanding of Black and Asian British women writings in the 2000s.

Xiaolu Guo (who was born in 1973) is a Chinese-British writer, poet, and film maker. She left China and moved to London in 2002 on a film-making scholarship from the British Council and decided to settle there. Guo was stripped of her Chinese citizenship when she acquired her British passport in 2012.² Before her move to London, Guo had already published several books and film scripts as well as two novels in Chinese, including *Village of Stones* (2004), which was translated into English and shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction prize. In 2007, she published her first novel written in English, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. Since then, she has published five novels, two memoirs, and a

² In: Xiaolu Guo, "Is This What the West is Really Like?" How it Felt to Leave China for Britain', *The Guardian*, 10 January 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/10/xiaolu-guo-why-i-moved-from-beijing-to-london>> [accessed 20 January 2022].

short story collection. A third memoir - *My Battle of Hastings: Chronicle of a Year by the Sea* – has just been published by Penguin on 1 August 2024. Guo has been short-listed for many prizes, including the Orange Prize for Fiction, won the 2005 Pearl Award for Creative Excellence, been placed on Granta's 2013 list of Best of Young British Novelists, and won the 2017 US National Book Critics Circle Award. Besides Britain, Guo has lived in several other European countries, including France, where she wrote her second novel in English, *UFO in Her Eyes* (2009), Germany, which she describes as her second home after Britain, and Switzerland, where she started writing her first memoir. In 2017, she published her first memoir, *Once Upon A Time In The East*, in which she describes her childhood in a village in southern China and explains the motivations for her work and her decision to leave her home country and settle in London.

As a Chinese writer who immigrated to Britain in adulthood, Guo engages with the processes of marginalization and assimilation through the presentation of her characters' struggles with linguistic alienation and their construction of new identities, common themes in Black and Asian British writings. However, much of the critical work and theory about Black and Asian British literature and identity explores South Asian, African, or Afro-Caribbean perspectives and seems to exclude East and West Asians. In this context, Mark Stein argues that 'the term Asian is structurally similar to the term Black British which it seeks to supplant; it has its own internal silences in that it in turn renders invisible and marginal cultural production which is not South Asian'.³ This argument is supported by the lack of attention of writers of East and West Asian descent, with the exception of Timothy Mo, from most key anthologies and introductory texts. For instance, although Sara Upstone, in her book *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-First-Century Voices*, argues that 'from the 1990s universal "black" identity has increasingly been called into question as a construct that, while politically useful, does not by itself effectively allow for full consideration of individual ethnic identities',⁴ her discussion of British Asian fiction only includes writers from South Asian backgrounds and excludes writers from East and Southeast Asian cultural backgrounds. Even in books that argue against the conventional limitation of the term South

³ Mark Stein, 'Cultures of Hybridity: Reading Black British Literature', *Kunapipi*, 20.2 (1998), <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss2/18>>, 76–89 (p. 77).

⁴ Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction Twenty-First-Century Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 2.

Asian such as *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary* by Neil Murphy and Wai-Chew Sim, the only British East Asian novel discussed is Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982). Similarly, Diana Yeh argues that 'Chinese authors in Britain' have not received 'any sustained scholarly interest', adding that there are 'few English language "Chinese" writers in Britain, but among those, even fewer have been remembered due to a lack of critics, scholars and publishing houses recognising their activities'.⁵

By discussing Guo's novel in this chapter, I aim to address such scholarly imbalance. Having discussed Welsh and Scottish identities in the previous chapters, analysis of the novel's London setting will enable me to investigate immigration and Britishness in relation to England (with a focus on an ethnic or cultural group who rarely feature in discussions of Englishness or Britishness). The chapter builds on Diana Yeh's argument that 'debates around the transformation of meaning of English and British identity by the cultural practices of artists of African-Caribbean and Asian descent have usually excluded the Chinese.'⁶ Considering a Chinese-born British writer in relation to concepts of Englishness and Britishness will enrich understanding of the complexities of identity and belonging in Britain.

Most of Guo's work explores the themes of identity, migration, language, and alienation. In an article published in *The Guardian* in 2016, Guo discusses the challenges of living between several languages and borders, a struggle that has fuelled her writing:

Since I left China 14 years ago, my everyday writing life seems to be a battle between the language I think in and the language I write in. Sometimes, before my pen touches paper, none of my languages – Mandarin, English, Zhejiang dialect – come out; my hand freezes and I stare at my notebook or a scene in the street, my thoughts lost in translation. I cannot write – even though I've written several books in Chinese, and a few more in English; and I still feel there's so much in me screaming to be heard. But something is deeply suppressed. My tongue is tied. I cannot express my thoughts with only one language. So I translate. I use one word to find another word. I try to

⁵ Diana Yeh, 'Contested Belonging: The Politics and Poetics of Making a Home in Britain', in *Chinese Fictions, English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, ed. by A. Robert Lee (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 299–326 (p. 300).

⁶ Diana Yeh, 'The Cultural Politics of In/Visibility: Contesting "British Chineseness" in the Arts', in *Contesting British Chinese Culture*, ed. by Ashley Thorpe and Diana Yeh (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 31–59 (p. 31).

write a transcript which is in both Chinese and English, a text that is alive and true for both cultures I am living in.⁷

Guo's use of words like 'battle', 'lost', and 'tied' is very expressive. Her struggle with language is presented as a barrier that hinders her creative process. It is only through translation and mixing of different languages that she can produce a text that is 'alive and true' in the way it reflects her immersion in different cultures. Guo's sense of linguistic alienation and identity confusion is depicted beautifully in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. The novel, structured like a dictionary, is the diary of a 23-year-old Chinese student living in London and offers a powerful exploration of language and the confusion of an individual living between languages, cultures, and on the borderlines of new identities. The novel highlights, in Bhikhu Parekh's words, how 'boundaries structure our lives, give us a sense of rootedness and identity, and provide a point of reference [...] Since they tend to become restrictive, we need to challenge and stretch them.'⁸ The year Z spends in Britain helps her stretch the boundaries that restricts her belonging to Britain and reconstruct a sense of identity that can accommodate the range of her cultural and linguistic referents.

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, language is not only a source of confusion and alienation but also a source of creativity. In her 2018 memoir, *Once Upon A Time in The East*, Guo explains that she used 'four different Chinese-English dictionaries, two Oxford, one Longman, one Xinhua,' to write *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, in an attempt to create an inventive novel that stretches the conventions of the genre, 'a diary recording [her] frustrations with learning another language and trying to make it [hers]'.⁹ The protagonist of the story, Z or the 'unpronounceable Ms Z' as she describes herself (p. 18), tracks her language struggle by keeping a diary: 'Every night, when I write diary, I feeling troubled. Am I writing in Chinese or in English? I trying express me, but confusing' (p. 38). As the story develops, Z's diary helps transform her into an independent writer and a creative artist.

⁷ Xiaolu Guo, 'One Language is Not Enough – I Write in Both Chinese and English', *The Guardian*, 13 October 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/13/my-writing-day-xiaolu-guo>> [accessed 12 April 2023].

⁸ Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000), p. 150.

⁹ Xiaolu Guo, *Once Upon A Time in the East: A Story of Growing Up* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 263.

The critical importance of language is emphasised by the organization of the novel into chronological diary entries, each starting with a dictionary definition of a word, 'thus we may read the text that follows variously as an inflection, a repudiation, and/or an elaboration of the word.'¹⁰ This format shows the instability of language and how the ways words are used, defined, presented, and understood can create conflicting narratives. Guo explains, 'Words are incapable, words are weak, words are burdened, words are manipulated, words are misinterpreted, words are obscure.'¹¹ It is the very obscurity of words that sometimes hinders their great capability to inscribe meaning. Adding dictionary definitions at the beginning of each entry in the novel not only highlights the limits of our understanding of words but also of individual agency—how a person uses language or interprets it. Guo's formal choices add depth to her creative use of language in the novel.

Guo's choice to write the novel in 'broken English' further highlights the power of language as a marker of cultural identity. Wenche Ommundsen remarks that Guo's language 'almost convinces us of its right to stand alongside the many other versions as a legitimate variation of world English, complete with its own imaginative poetic potential'.¹² It is this sense of claiming legitimacy and belonging despite being different that makes Guo's use of language so powerful and creative.

Building on Rachael Gilmour's argument that the novel 'destabilize[s] the assumed relationship between language and national belonging, in part by recasting London as a space of translation: a city of immigrants defined by its polyglossia, and a node in a reterritorialized transnational linguistic order',¹³ I will explore Guo's investigation of language, identity, belonging, boundary crossing, and representation of space. While Gilmour's analysis focuses on London, the novel depicts locations outside London that complicate our understanding of the city. Guo's novel goes beyond the typical

¹⁰ Angelia Poon, 'Becoming a Global Subject: Language and the Body in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Transnational Literature*, 6.1 (November 2013), 1–9 (p. 2).

¹¹ Xiaolu Guo, 'Visions in a Whirling Head', (2008), available online: www.guoxiaolu.com/WR_visions_whirling_head.htm [accessed 20 April 2023].

¹² Wenche Ommundsen, 'From China with Love: Chick Lit and the New Crossover Fiction', in *Chinese Fictions, English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, ed. by A. Robert Lee (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 327–46 (p. 342).

¹³ Rachael Gilmour, 'Living Between Languages: The Politics of Translation in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.2 (2012), 207–27 (p. 207).

representation of Britishness as centred around London as a multicultural metropolis, as seen in other famous postcolonial novels like Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Guo depict a sense of Britishness that reaches beyond London to include other locations in Britain and Europe. I will also investigate how 'the text constitutes a symbolic act of carving out space, of creating a public sphere'¹⁴ to demonstrate that the creation of identity is not solely an internal process but also involves engagement with Britain's social and cultural environment.

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo presents Z's identity struggle in Britain as a female *Bildungsroman*. As in Lalwani's presentation of Rumi's story as a *Bildungsroman*, Guo scrutinizes the impact of gender upon immigrants' struggle to assimilate into the British society. Nadia Avendaño argues that the female *Bildungsroman* is often used by 'contemporary ethnic women authors who wish to express female development, self-realization, and self-defined identification'.¹⁵ This is clear in the way Guo transforms her character from a student who feels invisible in Britain and can speak only in broken English to a self-realized writer who finds in English a means of self-expression and earning a living in China. Guo employs the theme of metamorphosis by engaging with the story of Pygmalion (both in its original form and its adaptations), in which a man sculpts his own ideal version of a women and marries her. Guo depicts Z's identity transformation during the year she spends in London, 'where [she] became an adult, where [she] grew into a woman' (p. 353). She reworks the myth of Pygmalion to renegotiate tradition of the classic *Bildungsroman*. She shows how Z, through learning English and traveling across Europe and other places in Britain, can claim back some of the artistic power – or the power to represent the world, through her remapping of Europe – from her English lover (who is a visual artist) and become an artist (a writer) on her own terms. Reading the novel as a *Bildungsroman* demands an engagement with issues of belonging and Britishness. In *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (2014), Mark Stein argues that the genre of the *Bildungsroman* is 'uniquely suitable for the process of the redefining of Britishness'.¹⁶ By

¹⁴ Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), p. 30.

¹⁵ Nadia Avendaño, 'The Chicana Subaltern and the Ethnic Female *Bildungsroman* in Patricia Santana's *Motorcycle Ride on the Sea of Tranquility*', *Letras Hispanas*, 9.2 (Spring 2013), 65–74 (p. 67).

¹⁶ Stein, *Novels of Transformation*, p. 30.

engaging with the genre, Guo represents Z's struggle for artistic agency in London as a way of reconfiguring a sense of Britishness.

However, Guo's exploration of Britishness and cultural adaptation is different from other famous novels published in the 2000s and set in London like Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. *Brick Lane* is often seen by critics as a *Bildungsroman* that is centred on the experience of an 'immigrant woman emerging from patriarchal oppression and finding self-respect as a worker in contemporary multicultural London.'¹⁷ In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen finds her footing in London and manages to achieve personal growth without leaving the parameters of Tower Hamlets in east London, and thus decides to settle in the country and claim belonging. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo presents Z as a cosmopolitan drifter who is not tied to a single place and is only able to formulate her identity through movement between London, China, Europe, and other places in Britain.

Z's identity struggle is reflected through Guo's use of body imagery, whether of actual human bodies or artistic representations of the body through sculptures and other art forms, to explore how Z's movement in Britain and around Europe help her inscribe new meanings on the space and reconstruct her identity, sense of belonging, and 'adaptation to the mainstream British society.'¹⁸ These body images are presented through fragmented memories with 'blur details and sketchy lines' (p. 58) that alter each time they are remembered. They recall Rushdie's 'Broken mirrors' that only reflect distorted reflections or 'shards of memory'.¹⁹ Such imagery reflects the complications of identity and cultural adaptation and claiming a sense of belonging in Britain. Therefore, in this chapter, Z's struggle with learning English is theorized through Guo's engagement with the myth of Pygmalion where the English lover is represented as the teacher but with diminishing agency, while Z turns into a dynamic writer. This struggle is made more prominent through recurring images of the body and through Z's travels to other places in Britain and Europe that reflect her identity transformation and her changed perception of London.

¹⁷ Nadia Valman, 'The East End Bildungsroman from Israel Zangwill to Monica Ali', *Wasafiri*, 24.1 (2009), 3–8 (p. 3).

¹⁸ A. Nejat Töngür, 'Sorry of my English: Lily and Mui in *Sour Sweet* and Z in *A Concise Chinese- English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Edebiyat Fakültesi dergisi*, 29.2 (2012), 167–80 (p. 176).

¹⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1991), p. 11.

Guo imaginatively conveys how her protagonist Z both encounters and, in some ways, reshapes her new cultural surroundings. In *British Multicultural Literature and Superdiversity*, Ulla Rahbek argues that *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* represents a 'reflection of contemporary multicultural life in superdiverse London', partly by establishing contrasts with less diverse locations in Europe.²⁰ In this chapter, I will argue that the novel moves beyond such conventional representation of London as a multicultural metropolis toward a depiction of London as a crossroads of transnational movement between other places in Britain, including Wales, and Europe. When she first moves to London, Z is overwhelmed by the 'English' culture that surrounded her and almost swallowed her (p. 143). However, her subsequent journeys to Europe and Wales represent a widening of experience that facilitates her claim for belonging to Britain through the creation of a more cosmopolitan identity.

'a woman' who 'lost her language': Identity and Belonging

Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers* traces a year in the life of Zhuang Xiao Qiao, a Chinese student who spends a year in London to learn English. Zhuang or Z, as she decides to call herself in London, declares on her first night in Nuttington House hostel that

I must learning this stylish English because it high-standard English from authority. Is parents' command on me: studying how speak and write English in England, then coming back to China, leaving job in the government work unit and making lots money for their shoes factory by big international relations. Parents belief their life is dog's life, but with money they save from last several years. I make better life through Western education. (p. 9)

This declaration sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Z is sent to London by her parents for a limited time with the intention of returning and helping to improve their living conditions. The limitations of her stay in Britain (along with the pressure from her parents and the many obligations that still connect her to her home country) are factors that affect her identity

²⁰ Ulla Rahbek, *British Multicultural Literature and Superdiversity* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 152.

negotiation and her sense of belonging in her new social and cultural surroundings. Also, the fact that the novel starts with a journey to Britain emphasises the process of immigration and the linguistic and social complexities associated with the shift from one cultural surrounding to another. In the novel Guo employs creative linguistic and formal choices to explore the complexity of identity in Z's struggle to construct a sense of home in London.

A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers explores the struggle of individuals who are not born and raised in Britain, but rather those who move and stay for a short period of time, such as students and short-term workers, or those who decide to settle in adulthood. Z's story can be read as a representation of such individuals and how the complexity of their perspectives reshapes definitions of Britishness. Alienation and loneliness, the shift from one language to another, along with being caught between the culture of a distant homeland and the new, somewhat alienating cultural surroundings of Britain, instigate the need to renegotiate identity and the sense of belonging. Keeping in mind Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's argument that 'British identity is now an umbrella term which gathers under it a large number of bi-racial and combined ethnicity people, as well as all kinds of ethnic and religious groups including English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, Polish, Turkish, Jewish, Chinese, and a host of other people',²¹ I will investigate how Z's identity evolves during her one year stay in London and explore how her journey to Britain and her travels to Europe alters her relationship to her home country, China.

Rachael Gilmour, in an article titled 'Living between Languages: The Politics of Translation in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', argues that *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers* 'is structured formally, thematically, and linguistically, around the movement between languages'.²² However, the themes of the novel stretch beyond a focus on movement between languages. The novel presents a movement between different understanding of identities and a shifting sense of belonging and Britishness that is mediated by language use. In the first two chapters of this thesis, we saw how Lalwani's and Kay's presentation of language is fuelled by a sense of legitimacy and a right to belong to Britain. However, writers like Guo,

²¹ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *Who Do We Think We are?: Imagining the New Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), pp. vii–viii.

²² Gilmour, 'Living between Languages', p. 217.

who write in English as a second language, are not often seen as ‘fully legitimized’ speakers of the languages they choose to use.²³ In this chapter language is viewed through a different lens. Learning English, for an adult immigrant such as Z, does not guarantee belonging to Britain. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* presents the idea of being caught between languages and the struggle of immigrants, whose stay is restricted by the length of their visa, to attain a sense of identity in Britain while maintaining connections to their home country. Thus, language can be conceived to mediate movement between different cultures and to complicate the negotiation of identity.

Significantly, the text is addressed to Z’s English lover and thus is presented as a liminal space for a negotiation of identity between self and other. In the novel, Guo presents Z’s struggle to attain a secure sense of selfhood as a cosmopolitan individual who chooses to cross frontiers and push the boundaries of the borderlands.²⁴ Z’s unsettled relationship with her (unnamed) English lover and her struggle to learn English are made more pronounced through Guo’s use of fragmented body imagery and her engagement with the myth of Pygmalion (which will be discussed in detail later in the chapter). In the Pygmalion myth the male figure is often presented as the artist or the teacher who sculpts the female protagonist to his liking. However, *A Concise Chinese English for Lovers* presents an imaginative interpretation of the myth that is complicated by Z’s English lover’s obsession with ugly, fragmented body parts. In the novel Z manages to claim the right to be an artist, which challenges the expected power dynamic whereby her lover’s roles as teacher and sculptor would allow him to mould her identity in accordance with his desires. By the end of the novel Z chooses to end her relationship with the English lover and go back to China, moving away from her parents’ town to become an author (p. 351), since she is now empowered by her ability to speak and write English.

Guo’s experimentation with language and form captures the transformation of English through the interplay between Chinese and English as her protagonist, a student, becomes more familiar with English. Guo transforms standard English to challenge

²³ Núria Codina Solà, ‘Intertextuality, World Literature and Migration: Dictionaries and the Female Body in Najat El Hachmi’s *L’últim Patriarca* and Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers*’, *Interventions* (2023), 1–19 (p. 11).

²⁴ Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory and Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 43.

stereotypes and conventional conceptions of identity and belonging in Britain, showing that such 'linguistic variety does far more than simply represent non-standard forms of English on the printed page, however; it actually serves as a type of characterisation, showing the ways in which the characters either identify with – or disassociate from – particular ethnic groups.'²⁵ The way Guo disrupts the English text with Chinese passages demonstrates that multiculturalism does not stand for monolingualism and that the English language is often 'taken over and transformed' by those people who are 'forced to speak it'.²⁶ This idea is supported by Maria Lauret's conceptualization of 'Wanderwords', words introduced into English by immigrants or settlers 'that disrupt, enchant, occlude or highlight the taken-for-granted English'.²⁷ Guo's unconventional style proves that words are 'like migrants, they carry cultural baggage and represent otherness'.²⁸

Guo's novel is a rich exploration of the complexities of language, migration, and cultural identity. Therefore, Lauret's theorisation of 'wanderwords' can be used to better understand Guo's creative use of language in the text. In *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature*, Lauret explores the ways in which language migrates across borders, cultures, and histories. She draws on a wide range of examples from American literature, to argue that language is not fixed, but rather dynamic. It evolves and adapts as it travels from one context to another through the process of migration. By exploring how language migrates across borders and cultures, Lauret's work provides a new framework for exploring Guo's representation of the complex and dynamic relationship between language and identity. Also, the fact that Guo chose to write her novel in English rather than Chinese further complicates identity issues presented in the text. It shows how English is used by bilingual writers as a medium for expressing thoughts, seeking an 'artistic shelter of a kind that does not exist in his or her native country and language.'²⁹ However, writing in a new language inspires creativity, inventiveness, and formulation of multiple

²⁵ Jarica Linn Watts, "We are divided people, aren't we?" The politics of Multicultural Language and Dialect Crossing in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, *Textual Practice*, 27.5 (2013), 851–74 (p. 852).

²⁶ Gabriele Rippl, "I Do Not Take Messages from Dead People": Cultural, Linguistic and Personal Boundaries in Pauline Melville's *Shape-Shifter*, in *Borderlands: Negotiating Boundaries in Post-Colonial Writing*, ed. by Monika Reif-Hulser (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 103–13 (p. 105).

²⁷ Maria Lauret, *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 1.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 155.

identities. Salman Rushdie argues in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands', that 'we [ethnic minority writers] can't simply use the language in the way the British did; [...] it needs re-making for our own purpose [...] To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free'.³⁰ Guo's creative use of language allows for an exploration of issues of migration, identity, and the struggle to belong to Britain.

The novel's form and structure complicate discussions about agency, language, cultural identity, and belonging. The novel is formally structured as a dictionary and is titled 'a dictionary'. Given the fact that dictionaries are fundamental to the process of translation and understanding, the structure can be seen as a way of giving more legitimacy to the character's experience, her interpretation of her cultural surroundings in Britain and Europe, and her claim for belonging. The addition of subheadings seems to govern how the dictionary entries are understood and illustrate that language is unstable and meanings shift and change.

Also, the novel is presented as a fictional work, as evident from the first page: 'Nothing in this book is true, except for the love between her and him.' However, there are several aspects that complicate this fictionality and place the novel in a liminal space between reality and fiction. First, the novel is said to be based on the diary that Guo kept when she first moved to Britain in 2002. Secondly, the incorporation into the novel of multiple images of Z's handwriting, a copy of her passport, and hand-drawn maps conveys a sense of reality and authenticity. The epigraph is a handwritten note, 'sorry of my english', which relates to the fact that although the novel's fluency improves significantly between the beginning and the end of the story, it never reaches perfection. This might be seen as a play on immigrant experiences and the fact that belonging to their new cultural surroundings is always conditional and incomplete. The novel starts with a dedication 'For the man who lost my manuscript in Copenhagen airport, and knows how a women lost her language.' This dedication gives a sense of reality and adds another layer of complexity to the narrative; is the story about losing one's language or learning a new one and how losing a language is connected to cultural identity and belonging between different countries? Together, these epigraphs frame the narrative and place several restrictions on how readers

³⁰ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 17.

perceive and understand Z's story. Thus, the text occupies a liminal space between reality and fiction, between the stability of dictionary meaning and the complexity of identity and experience.

As mentioned above, Guo's use of non-standard English is cleverly deployed to explore cultural identity along with issues of inclusion and exclusion. From the moment Z sets foot in Heathrow Airport, she experiences an overwhelming feeling that she does not have the right to belong to this new country: 'I am alien, like Hollywood film *Alien*, I live in another planet, with funny looking and strange language' (p. 9). Guo uses a comic, light-hearted tone to convey Z's confusion in her first interaction with her new cultural surroundings. However, the reference to Ridley Scott's 1979 horror film, *Alien* brings some cultural complications to mind. The film, described by critics as one of the greatest science fiction films of all time, depicts Aliens as terrifying, aggressive creatures that pose a threat to the life of anyone who comes into contact with them. The Aliens, in the film, force their way onto earth where their presence is deemed destructive. The fact that Z feels like an Alien from Scott's film conveys a sense of feeling out of place and being a stranger who is not welcome. Jonathan Rutherford argues that 'alien represents otherness, the site of difference and the repository of our fears and anxieties.'³¹ Similarly, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown explains that 'the prejudices unleashed in this country against "aliens" (the official term for immigrants which had been established in 1906 and which persisted until the 1970s) Black and Asian immigrants were caught in a flood of racism'.³² Establishing such connections between the way Z perceives herself and charged language about immigration in Britain that often vilifies them, opens the way for further discussion of issues of inclusion and exclusion that prevailed in Britain in the 2000s.

At the beginning of Z's stay in Britain, she comes equipped with plenty of baggage. In this respect she is like most immigrants, who, according to John McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 'tend to arrive in new places with baggage; both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, behaviours and values'.³³ The baggage Z carries is far more complicated than material possession, it is

³¹ Jonathan Rutherford, *Identity Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 10.

³² Alibhai-Brown, p. x.

³³ John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 211.

rather a reminder of the family and culture she left behind in China. As she drags her 'large man-made-in-China-suitcase' (p. 12) through London's streets, she notices that 'English they totally another species' (p. 10) and that 'Western name are un-rememberable, like all Western look the same' (p. 48). Different, not memorable, and Western, they do not adhere to her preconceived cultural and social values. The unconventional word 'un-rememberable' disrupts the text and challenges the readers' understanding of the intended meaning. The hyphenation of the word 'un-rememberable' in relation to the west draws attention to hyphenated ethnic identities and brings issues of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion to the fore. Stuart Hall in 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', argues that disturbing conventional spelling 'sets the word in motion to new meanings without erasing the trace of its other meanings.'³⁴ It is also noteworthy that Z depicts westerners ('Western') as a group rather than speaking of individuals, which can be interpreted as a reversal of colonial representations. Z's experience in Britain, like those of many immigrants, is complicated by ethnic affiliations, positioning one's self against a dominant group, and cultural and social baggage brought from their home countries.

In the text Guo intensifies the focus on Z's sense of marginalization by highlighting the effect of stereotypes forced on migrants in their new cultural surroundings. Representations of Z's encounters with 'sanctioned ignorance of Chinese history and culture in British society' relate to Guo's discontent with perceptions of the supposedly unfavourable Chinese presence in Britain compared 'with a more extensive British public knowledge of South Asia.'³⁵ This view is complicated by the way Z learns from her English lover 'to be ashamed of being Chinese.'³⁶

Z feels compelled to shorten her name because it is difficult for others, in Britain, to pronounce. Esterino Adami, in a paper titled 'English and Mobility: Linguistic and Stylistic Transformations in New Anglophone Literature', argues that Z's decision to shorten her name carries 'negative connections, being the last letter of the alphabet' and indicates a

³⁴ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222–37 (p. 229).

³⁵ Alex Tickell, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Transnational Reproduction: Form and Intertextuality in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* and *A Lover's Discourse*', *Studies in the Novel*, 55.1 (2023), 76–92 (p. 77).

³⁶ Eunju Hwang, 'Love and Shame: Transcultural Communication and Its Failure in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Ariel*, 43.4 (2013), 69–95 (p. 88).

sense of ‘marginalization’ and ‘a violation of identity’.³⁷ This argument is supported by Lea Sinoimeri who suggests that when Zhuang’s name is reduced to a single letter, she is ‘stripped of her singularity’ and forced to only exist ‘as a foreigner, reified otherness that the language of the nation constantly excludes, repulses and vilifies’.³⁸ This interpretation aligns with Z’s statement that, ‘In the West, in this country, I am barbarian, illiterate peasant girl, a face of third world, and irresponsible foreigner, An alien from another planet’ (p. 154). Both Adami and Sinoimeri suggest that names are an essential part of conceiving a fuller sense of identity. Thus, being forced to shorten her name in Britain intensifies Z’s sense of marginalization and forces her to renegotiate her sense of identity and social and cultural connections.

In this context, it is significant that Z chooses to consistently refer to her English lover as ‘you’ instead of using his name. Through this act, Z insinuates that his identity and agency are less relevant to the story than hers. When they first meet, the English lover declares ‘I don’t understand you Chinese at all. But I would like to get to know you’ (p. 55). He addresses Z as if she represents the entire Chinese nation. By referring to him as her English lover Z reverses the narrative and renders him a generic character. Z takes control of the narrative by stripping her English lover of his name and subsequently his identity and agency.

Z’s relationship to the English lover is presented as an apparent power struggle between two individuals from completely different cultural backgrounds. Language functions as the medium of their power struggle. Z meets her ‘English man’ (p. 166) at the cinema and immediately moves in with him because she misunderstood him when he said, ‘be my guest.’ (p. 53). The way Z intrudes into this unnamed, white British sculptor’s life seems to allude to the confusion, difficulties, and intricacy of British multiculturalism. Z’s intensified sense of marginality and otherness is apparent from the beginning of their relationship when she declares, admiring the sculptor’s ‘*noble words*’ (p. 79), ‘I am not noble. I am humble. And I speak humble English. I from poor town in south China.’ (p. 79).

³⁷ Esterino Adami, ‘English and Mobility: Linguistic and stylistic Transformations in New Anglophone Literature’, *Kervan*, 18 (2016), 11–20 (p. 15).

³⁸ Lea Sinoimeri, ‘Beyond the Mother Tongue: Language as Cultural Capital in Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*’, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 21.6 (2021), 734–48 (p. 739).

Her sense of otherness is connected to language or her bad English, 'My bad English don't match your beautiful language' (p. 61). The English lover is needed to help her improve her language and add meaning to her life in London. Z declares that in Britain she is 'just obscure nobody with name starts from Z. maybe this romance with [her English lover] put some weight into [her] life' (p. 147), (the relationship between Z and the English lover is further complicated through an investigation of the myth of Pygmalion and body imagery later in the chapter).

Z regards this English man as her gateway to learning English and becoming part of English society. Their story begins with Z recording every word he says and adding them to her personal dictionary, 'every sentence you said, I put into my own dictionary' (p. 73). The English lover shows his frustration with Z's continual questioning and her requests to explain the meaning of words: 'I just feel tired of you, [...] Always asking me words, how to spell them, what they mean' (p. 177). However, the novel ends with the English lover 'losing his words' as Z becomes more competent in English. As he explains in a conversation with Z near the end of the novel, 'Now when I speak to other people, I become slower and slower. I am losing my words' (p. 177).

Their relationship proves extremely difficult and as time passes, Z starts to feel that certain aspects of her identity are being lost, 'In your world, I am losing my world' (p. 194). In a sense, Z feels trapped between two cultures, living on the border, and never fully belonging to either. Her situation reflects Homi Bhabha's notion of beyond, where a person feels the need to belong but remains trapped in the margins or the periphery: 'we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion'.³⁹ Indeed, near the end of the story, she arrives at the conclusion that it is not only memorizing words and understanding grammar that constitutes a good English speaker: 'Is that how English people speak? If so, then I must be a bit English now' (p. 267). Z now understands that English is multicultural and that the year she spent in Britain did not only improve her language, but also altered her identity.

³⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

However, Z's experience of learning English and living in a new cultural surrounding is reminiscent of the identity struggle many immigrants experience. She summarises the difficulty of learning a new language by declaring, 'I see other little me try expressing me in other language [...] is like seeing my two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at the same time' (pp. 38-9). The way Z separates her lips into two indicates that her identity is fragmenting and multiple. It is interesting that Guo often engages with images of body parts to present Z's identity struggle and her changing sense of belonging to Britain. In the quotation, Z describes self-observation whereby she watches the evolution of a new self ('other little me') who speaks a different language. Her remark brings to mind Frantz Fanon's ideas about language and cultural identity in *Black Skin, White Masks*. According to Frantz Fanon full immersion in another culture can only be achieved by mastering the language: 'to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture'.⁴⁰ However, speaking a new language in a new cultural context can lead to self-division and psychological conflict, similar to the one Z experiences.

Z's internal struggle becomes more pronounced when she comes to the realization that 'here, in this place in the west, I lost my reference. And I have to rely on my own sensibility. But my sensibility towards the world is so unclear' (p. 157). Reference is a very complicated word that connects to the way Z positions herself in relation to language, culture, landscape, and society. Reference is often associated with dictionary definitions, documenting information, and giving it legitimate form. Constructing her story in a dictionary format is a way of creating her own reference and giving legitimacy to her experience. Z's realization that she 'lost her reference' reveals that people define themselves in connection to languages, and social, political, and geographical locations. This realization conforms to Ulla Rahbek's contention 'that our mother tongue instils habits of thought that we might not be aware of until we are faced to rethink [*sic*] them in a trans-cultural moment of cultural and linguistic translation.'⁴¹ Sensing that she can no longer depend on the habits instilled by her mother tongue to navigate the world, Z must rely on her 'own sensibility'. The Cambridge dictionary defines the word sensibility as 'an understanding of or ability to decide about what is good or valuable', which is suggestive of

⁴⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008), p. 38.

⁴¹ Ulla Rahbek, 'When Z Lost Her Reference: Language, Culture and Identity in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, 3.1 (2012), 1-12 (p. 11).

an emotional openness to life changes. However, Z's confusion causes her to feel uncertain about how to interact with her new cultural surroundings. Thus, she decides to rely on language as a gateway to British culture in the hope that learning to speak 'good' English might instil new habits through which to regain her 'reference'. However, the difficulty of the English language proves to Z that her identity negotiation is going to be long and exhausting to the point that she declares 'I am losing myself. It is painful that I can't see myself' (p. 341). As the story progress, Z realises that writing is her means of gaining a new frame of reference and becoming more cosmopolitan in Britain and in China. The year Z spends in Britain and her travels around Europe and Wales, help her gain her grounding as a writer, a 'reference' that is connected to both the country of her birth, China, and Britain, the country 'where [she] became an adult, where [she] grew into a woman, the country where [she] also got injured, the country where [she] had [her] most confused days and [her] greatest passion and [her] brief happiness and [her] quiet sadness' (p. 353).

Z's journey as a language student in London, which began with the declaration 'I am student and I am homeless' (p. 11), is a journey towards self-discovery that many students go through when studying in a different country. Komilie Situmorang explains that when students move to a new country, they begin to re-evaluate their identities and 'try to make sense of who they are' by interacting with their new cultural context.⁴² Students often 'strive to be accepted in the community by their language use. However, language use and participation are the real battlefields where power asymmetry is structured internally.' Given that students usually need to alter their identity to be accepted in their new cultural surroundings, 'the process of identities negotiation is long and exhaustive'.⁴³ Essentially, identity negotiation is a person's understanding of their relationship to the world and how that relationship is constructed through movement and space. Z declares that 'the day when [she] arrived to the west, [she] suddenly realised [she is] a Chinese' (pp. 186-7). In a sense, it is only when interacting with new cultural surroundings that she recognizes her difference. Her sense of difference is heightened to the degree that she becomes critical of her own culture: 'Why Chinese people become so mean in the west? I feel bit guilty for horrible service. Because I bring you, and you maybe thinking my culture just like this. Maybe that

⁴² Komilie Situmorang, 'Indonesian Students' Negotiation of Identities Through Language Use in England', *International Journal of Language Teaching and Education (Online)*, 4.2 (2020), 73–82 (p. 74).

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 74.

why some English look down of our Chinese. I am shameful for being a Chinese here' (p. 75). To some degree, she accepts the fact that she is an 'other' in Britain, which relates to Stuart Hall's description of his own experience as a student at Oxford in the 1950s as an 'unexpected site for coming to terms with being "other"'.⁴⁴

In his autobiography, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, Stuart Hall reflects on the complexities of his dual identity, having been raised during the colonial era in Jamaica and then moving to Britain to study at Oxford. Hall uses the term 'familiar stranger' to describe the difficulty of navigating both places, feeling neither entirely English nor Jamaican. The concept of a 'familiar stranger' depicts a sense of 'alienation', a situation where an individual feels intimately connected to a place, culture, or community, yet simultaneously experiences a sense of detachment or estrangement from it. This feeling arises from the duality of being both inside and outside a particular context, which can lead to a complex and often ambivalent relationship with that context. Although Hall is specifically concerned with the psychological impact of a colonial education, Z also grapples with the feeling of being a 'familiar stranger'. On one hand, she is intimately familiar with her Chinese heritage and language, both of which are significant parts of her identity. On the other hand, she's now living in the extremely different cultural landscape of London, and she must adapt to her new cultural surroundings. This adaptation leads to a sense of estrangement as she tries to reconcile her roots with her life in London. At the beginning of the story, Z explains that her sense of estrangement in Britain comes from the fact that she has no memory, past or stable cultural identity: 'I not having past in this country. No memory being build here so far, no sadness or happiness so far' (p. 38). This sense of being a 'familiar stranger' further complicates Z's identity and her sense of belonging to either Britain or China.

Z's physical and cultural alienation in Britain is apparent in the use of distancing words such as 'their' and 'that' to describe her connection to Chinese society. At the beginning of the story, language sets the limits of her self-formation. She is in Britain for a limited time under the conditions of her visa, which highlights the question of national identity. Her immigration status prompts her to consider how she can fully mediate her

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (London: Penguin Random, 2018), p. 157.

claims for belonging in new social surroundings while she is still legally and culturally attached to her original home country. In the end, she is buffeted by external forces: 'I am dragged back to that society' (p. 321). The phrase 'that society' suggests a feeling of detachment from Chinese society and culture. Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity 'is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being". It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending places, time, history and culture.'⁴⁵

Thus, on her trip back to China, Z observes, 'I look at the window and it reflects a stranger's face. It's not the same "Z" as one year ago' (p. 349). Once again, the text is presented as a liminal space, which holds in view her previous and present identities. Similar to Jackie Kay's characters in *Wish I was Here* and Kay's characterisation of her own experiences in interviews, Z's interaction with the mirror intensifies transformations in her identity. She is unable to recognize her reflection in the mirror because she has changed so much during the year she spent in Britain. She is no longer similar to her old self, when she lived in China. In this sense, to return to a home country is to 'experience again' what Stuart Hall describes as 'the shock of the "doubleness" of similarity and difference.'⁴⁶ Upon her return to China, Z decides to leave her hometown, settle in Beijing, and find a new job, since she can speak good English now. Thus, the English that was imposed on her by her parents ultimately serves as a means of escaping her oppressive family and a source of empowerment.

A Modern Take on the Pygmalion Myth

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, we witness Z's empowerment as she becomes more fluent in English and her transformation into a mature woman and artist in her own right. We follow her journey as she crosses physical and linguistic borders, renegotiating her identity and her connection to home. Her story is complicated by her relationship to her unnamed English lover. The presence of this male sculptor who is twenty years older than her recalls the myth of Pygmalion. Many works in literature have

⁴⁵ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 225.

⁴⁶Ibid, p. 227.

entertained the idea of the strong masculine man who controls a woman and moulds her to his liking. Film critic and theorist Laura Mulvey argued in 1999 that in modern narratives women still stand as a

signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.⁴⁷

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo challenges this argument and reworks the myth of Pygmalion in a creative way by portraying Z as the artist and giving her full control of the narrative, while presenting the male sculptor as a silent, passive bystander with diminishing agency. Building on Abbie Garrington's reading of Rebecca West's novel *Sunflower* in *Haptic Modernism: Touch and The Tactile in Modernist Writing*, the novel can be seen as 'a battle for the right to be a sculptor, in terms of generative or creative practice, and in terms of self-definition'.⁴⁸ Here, I will present a reading of Guo's novel as a modern reworking of the Pygmalion myth. Considering the novel's engagement with the myth illuminates our understanding of its fascinating exploration of identity, language, and belonging.

In the myth of Pygmalion, which is based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a sculptor named Pygmalion falls in love with a statue of a woman he made out of ivory. He asks Venus, the goddess of love, to make the statue come to life, and she accepts his request. The statue, Galatea who is now living, marries Pygmalion and they have a long, happy marriage. The Greek myth has often been reworked in literature, with the most famous interpretations being George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play, *Pygmalion*, and Alan Jay Lerner's 1956 musical and 1964 movie, *My Fair Lady*. Connecting Guo's novel to the Pygmalion myth definitely adds more complications and enhances our understanding of the text, especially because both the original myth and Shaw's play pivot on the themes of transformation, agency, and identity. Guo's novel can be read as a reworking of the original myth and of Shaw's play, where the poor flower girl, Eliza Doolittle, is transformed into a duchess, mainly

⁴⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens (Indiana: University Press, 1990), pp. 28–40 (p. 28).

⁴⁸ Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and The Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 66.

by changing her accent so that she speaks in standard English rather than dialect. Also, both works employ comedy and light-hearted conversation to explore complicated themes. Drawing on the Pygmalion myth, Guo explores the power dynamics inherent in language, to highlight how learning a new language, English, can be used both to achieve cultural assimilation and as a source of identity change. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Z's 'bad English' is equivalent to Eliza's Cockney dialect, and it is only through the help of her English lover that Z's mastery of English is such that she becomes an artist (a writer) in her own right.

Guo's creative reworking of the myth can be seen from the beginning of the story, where Z is presented as having control over the narrative. When she first arrives in London, she declares that she is on a mission to 'find man can love [her]. A man in this country save [her], take [her], adopt [her], be [her] family, be [her] home' (p. 38). She meets the English lover outside a cinema, which connects the novel to art and further evokes Shaw's *Pygmalion* given the fact that Higgins meets Eliza outside a theatre. Z decides that he will be a great help in her learning process. She proceeds to move into his house and constantly quizzes him about language. After living together for some time, the English lover starts to become tired and dissatisfied as Z becomes stronger and better at English. One day and after few arguments between Z and the English lover, Z tells him that 'your sadness actually is nothing to do with me. Your stress is not really from me. It is from your masculine world, because you don't feel satisfied with your life as a man' (p. 192). Z undermines her English lover's masculinity in a manner that recalls the way Higgins, in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, thinks of Eliza as less of a woman because she speaks in a working-class accent, 'a woman who utters depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere — no right to live.'⁴⁹

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the English lover reaches the point that he eventually stops communicating with Z:

When I first met you [...] Your language was as attractive as you. But what happened? [...] I talk and talk, more and more. I steal your words. I steal all your beautiful words. I speak your language. You have given up your words, just like you gave up listening. All you do is sleep (p. 293).

⁴⁹ Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (Harlow: Longman, 1991), p. 59.

The act of stealing his words intensifies Z's agency and shows how she takes ownership of her learning to become an artist. The word stealing here entails intellectual rather than physical theft. She is not only stealing his words but also his thoughts, identity, and individuality. Her creativity is underscored by resonances with T. S. Eliot's famous quip, in a 1920 essay on Philip Massinger, that 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal'.⁵⁰ The English lover has 'given up' his words, creativity, and artistic power and Z is becoming stronger and more independent. By giving up listening the English lover is becoming less active, present, or involved in his own life. Contrary to the original myth that started with Pygmalion's lifeless statue, the English lover turns into a statue by losing his agency, giving up on life, and constantly sleeping.

Z's agency is clear when she first encounters the English lover's sculptures, with their grotesque, surreal nature. Her first response is automatically and unfavourably to compare these distorted representations of the human form with naturalistic classical art as represented by pictures of Michelangelo's David. She acts like a critic judging the artistic value of these sculptures, 'Sculptures? A naked man no head [...] I amazed by this body, is huge, looks suffered. I remember picture from Michelangelo's David on your bookshelf, a very healthy and balanced body. But yours, yours far different' (p. 66). She undercuts his artistic talent and presents herself a judge of his work (Z's interactions with these fragmented body parts will be explored in more details later in the chapter).

By depicting the English lover as a decaying or diminishing artist, the text highlights the distinctions between the different art forms of sculpting and writing. Z is presented as a more dynamic, evolving artist who can progress through the creative act of writing her diary, while the English lover is 'boring' because he is 'a physical man, a labourer, using [his] hands to survive' (p. 152). There is a focus on the accessibility of the work of art and its expressive potential. Writing is presented as an art form that is built on communication and its ability to reach people easily and quickly, unlike sculpture, which Z finds obscure and difficult to interpret: 'Whenever I go to the modern museum, like Tate Modern, I never understand those modern sculptures. I hate them. They seem don't want to communicate with me, but their huge presence disturb me' (p. 155). Also, Z is presented as an ambitious

⁵⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', (1919), available online: <<https://tseliot.com/essays/philip-massinger>>.

artist who wants to 'do something big in [her] life and get fame' (p. 183), while the English lover is depicted as a loner, unable to share his art with anyone. As Z comments 'I never see you sell the sculptures. Nobody want buy a suffered and twisted statue' (p. 152). Therefore, a distinction is drawn between Z's empowering, creative art form, writing, and her English lover's boring, physical sculpture.

Unlike Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the English lover is presented with no agency and is only depicted as Z perceives him. He seems to have no existence outside of the interactions with Z and most of the information about him is presented through Z's reflections. Most of the conversations between them are initiated by Z and often end with Z reflecting on her emotions and what she thinks of him. He does not seem to enjoy these grillings and even asks Z 'why can't you just shut up for once and let me do my own thing' (p. 277). Like Eliza in Shaw's play, Z is not financially privileged. She is dependent on her English lover financially, which might explain why she continues in their relationship. In the beginning he shows some subtle efforts to mould her and make her more western in the way she thinks, speaks, and even the type of books she reads. However, such agency slowly disappears because Z is the one who controls the narrative, and she is determined to claim the right to be an artist.

Just as Shaw stresses the power of language as an indicator of social class, Guo highlights the power of language as a marker of ethnic identity. In Shaw's play Eliza is treated as an 'other' by Mr. Higgins because of her working-class accent and appearance, while all Eliza wants is to be acknowledged as a lady. Eliza declares that '[her] character is the same to [her] as any lady's,'⁵¹ a statement that captures the play's fascination with perception, and the complex interplay between surface and depth. In a similar way, Z feels othered in Britain by her 'bad' English and by the way she looks: 'I don't have anything familiar here [in Britain], and I only can speak low English here. Empty.' (p. 156) Feeling 'empty' and out of place in Britain, Z often describes the exclusion she experiences in public places based on her physical appearance, as well as other, more subtle forms of marginalization such as the denigration of her culture and feelings of inferiority. For example, when with her English lover's friends, she says 'I am lost. I am an outsider. And

⁵¹ Shaw, *Pygmalion*, p. 14.

nobody can deny this' (p. 266). Z is constantly reminded that she is an 'other' who always remains on the margins of this new culture. When at a restaurant celebrating her birthday with her friends from the language school and her lover's English friends, she notices that '[his] friends look at us three Orientals, like look at three panda escape from bamboo forest' (p. 163). Z's sense of difference in Britain is heightened by her cultural difference and her inability to speak 'good' English.

In Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Guo's novel, language is presented as a vehicle for social mobility. Both Z's and Eliza's English is 'refined' so that it aligns with standard English to allow them to permanently change their social positions. Male figures play a key role in their 'education'. lili porten in 'The Metamorphosis of Commodities in Shaw's *Pygmalion*', argues that 'education is indeed a quasi-magical force capable of propelling poor but worthy students to prosperity'.⁵² Eliza wants to speak better English to pass as a lady and work in a flower shop: 'I want to be a lady in a flower shop stead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road'.⁵³ Similarly, Z wants to learn English to help her parents grow their business through international connections. Both Eliza and Z feel inferior because of their current social positioning. Z explains that

I am sick of speaking English like this. I feel as if I am being tied up, as if I am living in a prison. I am scared that I have become a person who is always very aware of talking, speaking, and I have become a person without confidence, because I can't be me. (p. 143)

Z's tiredness, lack of confidence, and her awareness of her speech patterns shows a sense of inferiority but at the same time seems to fuel her wish to be better and grow stronger. Addressing her English lover, Z explains, 'You are the boss of yourself, so you have dignity. But I don't have anything here in your country! I have to struggle to get these things!' (p. 184). Z highlights her sense of otherness in Britain that seems to hinder her achievement of autonomy and self-expression. By stressing her agency and her aspiration to get all the things her English lover has, she turns Britain into a site 'through which subjecthood is possible'.⁵⁴

⁵² lili porten, 'The Metamorphosis of Commodities in Shaw's *Pygmalion*', *Differences*, 17.3 (2006), 69–86 (p. 72).

⁵³ Shaw, *Pygmalion*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Awan Amkpa, 'Drama and the Language of Postcolonial Desire: Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion"', *Irish University Review*, 29.2 (1999), 294–304 (p. 296).

Additionally, both Shaw's *Pygmalion* and Guo's novel explore the figure of the teacher or mentor who tries to shape the student or protégé. In *Pygmalion*, Henry Higgins seeks to transform Eliza Doolittle's Cockney accent into a more "acceptable" version of English, while in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the English lover attempts to mould or sculpt Z's language and cultural identity into a more Westernized version of herself, which ultimately leads to the failure of their relationship. The English lover sends Z to Europe to educate her through travel on how to become more Western:

In the West we are used to loneliness. I think it's good for you to experience loneliness, to explore what it feels like to be on your own. After a while, you will start to enjoy solitude. You won't be so scared of it anymore. (p. 222)

He sends her to Europe to foster her independence and to force her to be more Western by accepting loneliness. He also gives her a book to read while on the trip, which, ironically, is Hanif Kureishi's 1998 novel *Intimacy*. The novel tells the story of a failed relationship because the forty something male protagonist does not feel happy or satisfied with his life.

Guo adapts the Pygmalion myth by taking the power from the male sculptor and assigning it to her female protagonist instead. Unlike Shaw's play where 'we are led to see that Eliza evolves from confusion, ignorance, and illusion to coherence, knowledge and reality under the help and guidance of the male professor,'⁵⁵ Z evolves into a writer through her own hard work. Z expresses near the end of the story that she 'want to control [her English lover], [...] [she] want to cut off [his] extension to the world and [his] extension to the others' (p. 325). In Shaw's play Higgins is presented as a powerful mentor who manipulates and influences his student for his own personal gain. Throughout the story, Eliza is presented as a passive receiver of Higgins' instructions, who is often treated as inferior to him, and never expresses any wish of her own. Chen Lihua explains that Shaw's play stresses 'the unequal relationship between man and woman: Man is superior, woman is inferior.'⁵⁶ However, Z's English lover is frustrated that he doesn't have his 'own space to think about [his] sculptures, [his] own things, and [his] own words' (p. 177). In contrast to the original myth where Pygmalion moulds and admires his powerless statue, Z observes that her English lover is becoming 'silent', 'like a nude statue' (p. 176). Guo takes the power

⁵⁵ Chen Lihua, 'A Feminist Perspective to *Pygmalion*', *Canadian Social Science*, 2.2 (2006), 41–44 (p. 42).

⁵⁶Ibid, p. 41.

from the male sculptor by emphasising his protégée's agency (and self-expression). Near the end of the story the lover rejects his art completely by commenting 'if [he] had better things to do [he] would give up making art. [he] would rather do something more solid' (p. 333), to which Z replies 'I'd like to dedicate my life to do something serious, maybe things like writing, [...] I don't care about what you said about artists. I'd like to write about you, one day. I'd like to write about this country.' (p. 333). Thus, highlighting her agency and creativity and connecting it to Britain.

Moreover, the intertextual allusions in the text are underlined by the fact that in the original myth, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion is a sculptor like Z's English lover. The English lover remains a shadowy, ambiguous figure because of Guo's (and her narrator's) choice, like Ovid's Pygmalion's faceless statue, to limit his artistic power. In the original myth Pygmalion's sculpture is perfect, well-polished, and life like, but the English lover's sculptures are not perfect. They are never complete, and the work of art does not take on a final shape. Z describes these sculptures as 'suffered and twisted statue[s]' (p. 152). The English lover is often portrayed as 'fascinated by ugliness, ugly people, ugly buildings, ruins, rubbish' (p. 320). His artistic power is constantly undermined by Z's desire to become 'a celebrated writer' (p. 294). Moreover, in Z's story the transformation is not miraculous, as in the original myth, or by utter chance, as in Shaw's play; her mastery of English is the result of hard work and determination. She becomes an artist in her own right, and like the sculptor who falls in love with her own creation, she chooses to fall in love with her English lover. At the end, she decides to end the relationship because it no longer fulfils her, and she returns to China.

Unlike the ending of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where the statue who turned into a beautiful woman opens her eyes and sees her sculptor as her world, 'Shyly raised/ her eyes to his and saw the world and him',⁵⁷ and unlike Shaw's *Pygmalion* where the romantic transformation is completed by 'Eliza marrying Higgins and settling down to fetch his slippers for him',⁵⁸ Guo's novel ends with Z's decision to leave England determined to never return. She realises that she cannot continue to live with her English lover because 'in [his] world, [she is] losing [her] world. In [his] pain, [she is] losing [her]self. Everything makes

⁵⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, available online at: <<http://classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.10.tenth.html#373>>.

⁵⁸ Lihua, p. 41.

[her] thinking about [him], only about [him] and [his] world. [She is] like a wallpaper stick on the wall of [his] house, looking at [him] and decorating [his] life' (p. 194), and that is not the life she wants for herself now that she can speak better English.

Overall, Guo creatively adapts the Pygmalion myth in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by reversing the roles and giving more power to her female protagonist rather than the male sculptor. Guo engages with Shaw's play, in which Higgins regards Eliza as a project through which to demonstrate his abilities, and with the original myth where the sculptor falls in love with his perfect sculpture. Guo's reworking of the Pygmalion myth presents the conflicts and complications a person faces when moving into a new culture or when they start to learn a new language. By using language as a metaphor for identity and exploring the power dynamics inherent in language, Guo offers a powerful presentation of the ways in which language can facilitate self-discovery. Indeed, the English lover's portrayal at the beginning of the story as a source of transformation and knowledge, disappears at the end to allow Z to speak in her new, acquired voice. Hence, as Z 'starts to speak English properly' (p. 178), the English lover turns into 'a small dried fig fell from the tree' (p. 327). Z lays claim to her artistic power and dreams of becoming a famous writer, 'who has the fame in England, Scotland, and even Wales' (p. 294). Meanwhile, her English lover's 'beauty is being diminished, by [her]. Day by day. Night by night' (p. 328).

I will not 'tie myself to one place': Movement and Border Crossing

Z's dream of becoming a celebrated writer, 'who has the fame in England, Scotland, and even Wales' (p. 294), is presented in a chapter titled 'bestseller' that she writes after returning from her trips to Europe and Wales. It can be deduced from the dream that her travels empower her, help her to lay claim to a multicultural British identity, and lead her to reconsider her relationship with London. Z is aware that her creativity and her unique cultural self-expression as a writer is important in the formulation of her identity. What is interesting about Z's dream is that she presents a perspective that is wider than just London or Englishness. It represents a more expansive vision that includes other constituent nations of Britain – Scotland and Wales – and even Europe.

Z's dream reflects Guo's understanding of Englishness that moves away from a focus on colonial connections to distant homelands, as seen in other popular works in the 2000s, to conceiving Englishness in relation to Europe and other nations in Britain. In her dream, Z explains that she wants to write a book about Chinese noodles, titled: *Getting To Grips With Noodles: 300 ways of Chinese cooking*. Her noodles will have ingredients from other European countries, 'meaning either it can be prepared as Chinese food, or it can become Italian spaghetti. For example, one can just change ginger into basil, or replace chilli to rosemary with a bit cheese, then noodles will get totally different identity' (p. 295). Thus, it can be reasoned that Z's conception of her new identity involves movement between different parts of Britain and Europe, and the mixing of different social, cultural, and linguistic aspects both in connection to Britain and to her home country, China.

Movement and border crossing are integral to *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*' structure. Both the prologue and the epilogue depict movements between different cultures, languages, identities, and countries. However, although the prologue and epilogue depict a similar scene, a plane journey, they engage with language, identity, and cultural perception in completely different ways that highlight the immense change Z has undergone during her one year stay in London. In this section, I will investigate how Guo represents Z's experience of London as complicated and alienating at first, and how Z's relationship with London changes after her travels to Europe and Wales. The city is a major theme in the text, it serves as a platform for the development and nurturing of hybridised identities through movement and border crossing.

Guo's London is different from the London of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, bestsellers that are often celebrated for their depiction of immigrants' struggle to achieve a sense of belonging in Britain. In both novels London is presented as a kind of a 'promised land' for Nazneen in *Brick Lane* and the Iqbal family in Smith's *White Teeth*. These protagonists find their footing in London and never feel the need to leave the parameters of their neighbourhoods, the East End of London for Nazneen and northwest London for the Iqbal family. They create their own home away from home in the small communities they live in, and they manage to achieve prosperity and personal growth. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo defies this sense of confined belonging by

framing the novel as a journey and by allowing her protagonist to venture outside of London to Europe and Wales.

For Guo, London is not a space of limitless possibilities, personal growth, and attaining autonomy but rather a crossroads of transnational movement. Z is not geographically grounded in London like the characters in *Brick Lane* or *White Teeth*. Movement across Britain and Europe is an integral part of Z's evolving identity and her awareness of the potential for a new kind of cultural and creative expression through writing. John Clement Ball explains that most post-colonial writers see London as 'a place where personal and collective identity can be productively interrogated.'⁵⁹ However, Guo represents Z's trips to Europe and Wales as a source of her personal growth through which her perception of London changes. After her trips she begins to reflect on her identity, her conceptualization of the idea of home, and the possibility of becoming a writer, she even starts to view London as a potential home. Consequently, other places supplement the construction of urban space in London and give more depth of meaning to her interaction with the city.

When Z first moves to London, the city is depicted as a complicated, strange space that makes her feel out of place, increasing her nostalgia for China. She explains, while sitting in the room that she rents from a Cantonese family in Tottenham Hale, that 'The leaves blow outside. The street lights shine on my window. I am thinking I am only person to be awake in the world. I am thinking of China' (p. 51). After meeting her English lover outside a nearly empty cinema (p. 47), she attempts to create a sense of home in his Hackney house. For her, the house feels like a shelter from unwelcoming London, as if 'the noisy London being stopped by brick wall. The grey city kept away by this garden' (p. 67). The English lover's garden is the first place that seems welcoming to Z and gives her a space to express her cultural identity without being judged by the outside world.

Just as Jackie Kay plants a Moringa tree in *Red Dust Road* to nurture ancestral connections to Africa and her extended family there, Z decides to grow some plants in the English lover's garden that remind her of her far away home and give her a sense of

⁵⁹ John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 172–73.

grounding in London: 'we [Z and her English lover] bought the small little sprouts of Chinese cabbage at home [...] We plant all these little things. Digging the soil, and putting every single sprout into the hole.' (pp. 102-3). Through the act of planting, she seems to lay claim to the city. She wants to be part of the city, the society, and the country. This scene is presented in opposition to the Chinese family that she stays with in Tottenham Hale whose 'garden is concrete, no any green things' (p. 42). The Chinese couple remain rooted in their home country and are unwilling to create connections with London or British culture. Z describes their garden 'Like little piece of Gobi desert. What a life! Or maybe all the immigrants here living like that?' (p. 54). Therefore, Z's desire to plant Chinese cabbages that remind her of home in London is seen as a search for a sense of rootedness in the city while maintaining a connection to her home country.

Z's sense of alienation in London stems from not knowing much about British culture and her fear of not finding meaningful connections: 'No safety in this country, I think unsafe feeling come from I knowing nothing about this country.' (p. 13). Also, language affects her ability to navigate the city: 'how I finding important places including Buckingham Palace, or Big Stupid Clock?' (p. 14). Z explains 'that's why I hate London. Not only London, all big cities. Big cities are like huge international airports. You can't have one moment of peace here, and you can't find love and keep it.' (p. 168). Z's comparison of London (and other big cities) to an airport further emphasises its portrayal as a crossroads of transnational movement. Recalling Marc Augé's theorisation of Non-Places which he define as places that are devoid of meaningful social interactions and individual identity,⁶⁰ London here is portrayed as a place where Z feels lonely and unseen, a non-place, rather than a home where she can belong and flourish.

It is only after her trips to Europe and Wales that Z's view of London changes and she starts to feel sufficiently empowered to claim belonging. Z goes to Europe and Wales to search for experiences she cannot find in London. By presenting Z's trips to Europe and Wales Guo mobilizes the 'spatial metaphor of the borderlands or la frontera' to show that 'one can embrace multiple contradictions and refuse the impossible effort to synthesize them fully, thus turning apparent oppositions into sources of insight and personal

⁶⁰ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).

strength.’⁶¹ The metaphor of the borderland is discussed by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands / La Frontera: the new mestiza*⁶² as a way of rethinking issues of identity and belonging. Anzaldúa presents her own story as a mestiza and theorizes the ‘borderlands’ as a contested space of movement, tension, and contradiction. As in this theorization, Z’s trip to Europe is depicted as a journey to configure the pieces and contradictions that comprise her identity. When leaving Amsterdam she realises ‘There is no way to return, I know I am on a journey to collect the bricks to build my life. I just need to be strong’ (p. 213). The word bricks recalls her description of London as a place ‘with brick buildings everywhere’ (p. 12), thus suggesting that the trip is a way of reconfiguring her identity and reconsidering her relationship with London. In Paris her perception of the city is also affected by her experience in London: ‘English told that French are arrogant they don’t like speak English. So I didn’t try talk to anybody in France. But that’s good for me. I don’t even need to remember how to speak Chinese there’ (p. 215). Travel helps her regain her ‘reference’ and brings out the ‘sensibility’ that she lost when she first arrived in London (p. 156). However, it is also worth noting the contrast between being always reminded that she is Chinese in London and having the choice to forget in Paris. In Europe, Z embraces the multiple contradictions of her identity and reconsiders her connection to London.

During her trip around Europe, Z visits Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Venice, Tavira, Faro, and Dublin. The trips are characterized by freedom of movement in the cities she visits, and her ability to exercise control over her own body, a point I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter. Before embarking on her trip, she comments that ‘the aim of the Schengen agreement is to allow free circulation of people’ (p. 197). Freedom of movement and open borders are essential part of Z’s experience and her formulation of her identity. While in Berlin she is ‘alone, wandering around’ and ‘feel really naked’ (p. 221). She ‘feels naked’ because she no longer has the worry of learning a new language, the cultural baggage that connects her to her home country, or the struggle of belonging to her new surroundings. This feeling of being naked is also connected to a dream she had when she first moved to her English lover’s London home:

⁶¹ Mary Pat Brady, ‘Border’, in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, 3rd Edn., ed. by Bruce Burgett, and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), pp. 34–37.

⁶² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

recent I dream few times that I am naked in street, in market, and even on highway. I run through busy street fast as I can to go home. But still, everybody in street surprising to see I am naked. you say this dream about shame or fear of being exposed (p. 69).

Therefore, the dream might be interpreted as a wish to be free, both from language learning and the racialized atmosphere of London, rather than a sense of shame, as the English lover understood it. This wish is only achieved when she travels around Europe and Wales.

However, London is now ingrained in her cultural memory and affects the way she views the world. For instance, Z notices that Berlin lacks the charm of London, it mainly 'remind [her] so much of Beijing. The city is in square shape. Straight long street, right, left, no wandering.' (p. 221), unlike London with its tube 'like plate of noodles' (p. 19) in which she can wander for hours. After her wandering in Europe and after she 'finish reading the last page of the book [Kureishi's *Intimacy*], [she] decide go back London as quickly as possible' because she is 'tired of travel' (p. 259) and London is the only place that can bring her comfort. However, while returning to London she loses her luggage, even 'all the maps' (p. 263) that the English lover has given her. This suggests that she is returning to London leaving everything behind and with a fresh perspective on identity and belonging.

Before each chapter that documents her journey through Europe, Z inserts maps that encapsulate her experiences in each city. The inclusion of hand drawn maps in the novel taps into Guo's formulations of Englishness and identity. In a 2008 article in the *Independent*, Guo reflects on identities and maps by explaining:

I started to realise that identity is actually the most important thing in a foreign country [...] So here I am in decayed Europe, looking at the map of China. A map of China with English letters. That is confusing - when you read your own country's map in a foreign language, you are not sure any more where those places are supposed to be. I don't really find the China with its cities and towns, all I see are those borders [...] And on that map I'm still trying to find out why I am a Hui and why I am a peasant and why I am a Chinese.'⁶³

⁶³ Xiaolu Guo, 'Fragments of My Life', *The Independent*, 10 May 2008
<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/fragments-my-life/docview/311471365/se-2?accountid=14680>> [accessed 01 June 2023].

Guo understands that ‘maps are powerful tools for encapsulating, constructing, and communicating identity.’⁶⁴ Looking at ‘a map of China with English letters’ in ‘decayed Europe’ makes her realise how her sense of national identity has changed. Being in a different continent, Europe, and reading China’s map in English, she no longer identifies with the places she sees in the map, and she starts to question her identity and identification with the culture and the geographical locations. All Guo can see are the borders that surround China. The borders, with their confusion, tension, and restrictions, made Guo unable to find herself, lost and bounded by roots and origins that no longer define her as a person.

Similar ideas are evoked in Z’s hand drawn maps of the cities she visits in Europe. Z draws borderless islands surrounded by what looks like moving sea waves and labelled with both English and Chinese letters. The fact that these cities are borderless and only surrounded by sea both invites a connection with Britain as an island and conjures the idea of losing connection with one’s origins. Traveling through Europe, Z no longer needs to think about where she comes from, because all that matters is where she is right now. She is not limited to a single place and her transnational identity stems from her mobility.

By depicting Z’s imaginary maps as more important than the ‘old maps’ (p. 199) that her English lover gave her before she embarked on her trip to Europe, Guo queries the certainty and accuracy of maps. She shows how Z can create her own reality by reimagining borders, mixing languages, and marking only the places that are significant to her on her imaginary maps. Guo shows that ‘maps are ‘fluid visual objects that can easily distort or manipulate meaning(s)’,⁶⁵ opening new possibilities for understanding identity and belonging. Through the creative act of drawing Z tells her story and exerts control on her expression of identity.

These hand drawn maps could also be interpreted as Z’s attempt to draw her own route and find her individuality. Z uses the visual maps of her trip around Europe as a creative expression of a new identity that includes a revaluation of her views about London:

⁶⁴ Alexander J. Kent and Peter Vujakovic, eds., ‘Maps and Identity’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Mapping and Cartography* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 255.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Ho, “‘The Geography Helps’”: Affective Geographies and Maps in Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, in *Affective Geographies and Narratives of Chinese Diaspora*, ed. by Melody Yunzi Li and Robert T. Tally Jr. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 11–30 (p. 14).

‘When I was in China, [...] I thought London in the middle of the whole Europe, because Britain sounds so big: “the empire on which the sun will never set”. So London must be in the centre Europe’ (p. 255). Z’s movement through Europe and Wales (which I will discuss below) makes her realise that London is no longer imbued with grandeur and that most of its charm comes from the fact that it facilitates transnational travel.

By including these visual images, or what Elizabeth Ho describes as ‘Self-reflexive maps’,⁶⁶ in the text, Guo asserts Z’s right to self-representation and shows the importance of Europe in the creation of her transnational identity. Guo engages in the literary practice of remapping cities, akin to the Brontës’ portrayal of Yorkshire, Charles Dickens’s London, or J.K. Rowling’s enchanted Scotland. Also, Guo taps into the history of travel writing by incorporating images that serve the function of a travel Atlas, which makes the text feels more authentic and realistic. Mary Louise Pratt argues in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* that travel books tend to exert a ‘sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity’.⁶⁷ She continues to argue that travel narratives, which started as ‘key instruments that made people “at home” in Europe feel part of a planetary project; a key instrument, in other words, in creating the “domestic subject” of empire’,⁶⁸ have more recently been ‘recycled to describe contemporary experiences of migration and displacement in the neoliberal order, creating the subjects of globalization’.⁶⁹ Z reimagines concepts of Englishness by taking a comparative approach, which is conceived with reference to other national identities within Britain and a connection to Europe. The maps are similar to her dream of making noodles that express a distinctive, hybridised identity by mixing ingredients from around Europe. Her maps, with their open borders, multilingualism, and personal landmarks, show how she envisions her identity as not only related to London but also to the nations of Britain and a connection to Europe. Through these maps she identifies specific places as points of ‘reference’ for her evolving sense of self rather than depending on the fixity of origin, history, or homelands. She is drawing a unique map that captures her understanding of her relationship with the outside world.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

⁶⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 227.

After returning from Europe, Z and her English lover visit west Wales. Z explains that 'in the windy afternoon, we arrive at west Wales. Coming out from the train, I breath out the filth from London. The Irish Sea is underneath the mountain [...] People in Wales walk slower than in London' (p. 279). Like her trips to Europe, Z's interaction with the Welsh landscape is mediated through her experience in London. She is amazed by the calmness and beauty of Wales as compared to busy, congested London. In Wales Z does not have to remember that she is different or that her English is not good enough:

I try to learn more vocabularies to be able to communicate. I try to put the whole dictionary in my brain. But in this remote countryside, in this nobody's wonderland, what's the point of this? It doesn't matter if one speaks Chinese or English here; it doesn't matter if one is mute or deaf. Language is not important anymore. (p. 283)

After all her struggle with learning English and searching for a sense of belonging in London, Z realises in Wales that language is no longer important. The term 'nobody's wonderland' can be understood as reflecting Z's ease of connecting with the place and achieving some kind of belonging without being judged or overwhelmed by the cultural surroundings. Thus, her interaction with the welcoming natural world in Wales appears to present her with a new way to belong to Britain. It seems that her experience in Wales helps her regain some of her frame of 'reference' that she lost when she moved to London (p. 157). In a sense, similar to Charlotte Williams's theorization of her identity in connection to Wales, Z is now 'full of the references to landscape, to the sounds and symbols of nation, the histories and heritage, the politics and the cultural nuance of place,'⁷⁰ that makes her feel at ease and relieve some of her identity struggle. This is also clear in her comments on watching her English lover enjoying nature in Wales, Z observes that 'The city weakens your energy. But you become alive again in this place' (p. 283).

During their trip, Z and her English lover visit a lighthouse in Wales. Z describes the lighthouse as

standing at the bottom of the hill. It faces to the sea. There is nothing else around it, not even a sheep. It feels like is built at the end of the world [...]

⁷⁰ Charlotte Williams, 'On Being a Writer in Wales', 19 November 2023, Available online: <<https://nation.cymru/culture/on-being-a-writer-in-wales-charlotte-williams/>> [accessed 08 January 2024].

The lighthouse is keeping something secret, a secret which I don't understand' (pp. 282- 83).

The way the lighthouse faces the sea is reminiscent of Charlotte Williams's description of the Welsh coast in her memoir *Sugar and Slate*, as 'a sea that brimmed over with beginnings and endings, reminding us of passages of the past, of our present and our future. We would always be able to look outwards. [and never feel] hemmed in by boundary or border'.⁷¹ Thus, once again it is the freedom of movement and the blurring of the borders that help Z transform her world and embrace a more flexible identity that merges her past, present, and future.

Moreover, both in Wales and Europe Z often visits edge places as if presenting a sense of always being on the margins and highlighting the complex relationship between centres and peripheries. This can be seen in her depiction of the difference between Wales and England: Wales is presented as a natural 'wonderland' (p. 283) while London is a 'desolate place' (p. 264). Guo accentuates such difference by tracking the variations in Z's stress levels between the two places. On the way back from Wales to London, the English lover comments, "'You are too anxious. Try to relax. Try to enjoy life'" (p. 340). In a similar way, the presentation of borderless European cities is contrasted to her reflection that 'London, by appearance, so noble, respectable, but when I follow these Alis, I find London a refuge camp' (p. 22). This is the London that is often depicted in other famous novels of migration, where immigrants come to find shelter and economic prosperity. It is the London that Zadie Smith describes, in her essay 'Fences: A Brexit Diary' which was written in the wake of the vote to leave the EU, as a place where 'fences are being raised everywhere' and where 'the gaps between north and south, between the social classes are being constantly highlighted'.⁷² Thus, the emphasis on Wales's open sea and a borderless Europe might be interpreted as a means of commenting on or highlighting a sense of fragmentation within Britain and shifting conceptions of Englishness and Britishness.

Guo's representation of Englishness in the novel is different from other popular British Asian and Black British women's fiction from the 2000s set in London. In *Brick Lane*

⁷¹ Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2002), p. 185.

⁷² Zadie Smith, 'Fences: A Brexit Diary', *New York Review of Books* (August 2016) <[https://www.nybooks-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/](https://www.nybooks.com/eu1.proxy.openathens.net/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/)> [accessed 20 May 2023].

for instance, Nazneen's friend Razia is always depicted wearing a union jack sweatshirt and in *White Teeth* the twin brother Magid only speaks in a perfect Queen's English. These characters display a sense of identity that is centred around ideas of Englishness and Britishness that are mainly connected to where they live, that is the city space of London, in an attempt to become 'more English than the English.'⁷³ Kristian Shaw, in a book titled *Brexit: British Literature and the European Project*, argues that 'British authors have certainly not engaged with Europe in the same way they have engaged with the legacy of empire'.⁷⁴ However, Guo's exploration of Englishness expands to Europe and Wales. Also, the choice of Kureishi, who is known for reshaping conventional notions of Englishness,⁷⁵ and reading his novel [*Intimacy*] in Europe grounds *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* as resisting conventional definitions of Englishness and Britishness. Through her fictional representation of Europe as part of Z's journey, Guo appears to resist concepts of Euroscepticism and English exceptionalism, which gave rise to the EU referendum in 2016 and the UK's decision to leave the EU. Thus, for Guo London's uniqueness does not stem from its position as a sanctuary and home for the vulnerable, as seen in Ali's and Smith's novels, but from its open borders and its ability to facilitate movement between Europe and other nations in Britain. Guo's focus on the European aspect, as a Chinese born British writer, presents a depth of insight that comes in opposition to a narrow focus on commonwealth or Empire presented in some critically and publicly acclaimed works published in the 2000s.

⁷³ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 406.

⁷⁴ Kristian Shaw, *Brexit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p. 27.

⁷⁵ See for example: Susie Thomas, 'Something to Ask You: A Conversation with Hanif Kureishi', *Changing English*, 14.1 (2007), 3–16; Mona Narain, 'Exoticisations of the Self: The First "Buddha of Suburbia"', in *The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 54–67.

'I not lonely, because I with another me': Body Images and the Transformation of Space

Z's movement and her trips to Europe and Wales helped transform her identity and give her a new sense of belonging to Britain. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the depiction of the body in pieces plays a significant role in reflecting Z's transformation of identity and her struggle with language and belonging. In this section, I will investigate the fascinating interplay between identity, belonging, and the body in Guo's novel. The presentation of the body in the novel has been discussed in previous scholarly work. For example, Angelia Poon has investigated 'the intractability of the body as well as its openness to linguistic meaning and inscription' in Guo's novel, and how this facilitates Z's transformation into a global subject.⁷⁶ However, in this section, I look at Guo's representation of the body through a different lens. I will explore Guo's depiction of the body movement through space to highlight the embodied experiences of dislocation and Z's struggle to belong. I will argue that, instead of depicting London as a reassuring location, Guo creates a sense of fragmentation through the representation of memories, reducing the importance of the space itself, and moving the focus onto Z's everyday experiences in the city. This sense is further complicated through Z's journeys to Europe and her creative remapping of borders. The narrative shifts between different locations, 'forcing the reader to piece together a life lived—and recounted—in fragments'.⁷⁷ In this context, the body, like language, is presented as a marker of fragmentation, and a way of articulating and dealing with displacement and Z's struggle to create a sense of identity in Britain. I will investigate this aspect of the novel by drawing upon Rushdie's concept of 'broken mirrors'. As Rushdie writes, it is 'precisely the partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation, that made them so evocative [...] The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.'⁷⁸ Z's impressions of her body, its experiences and spatial relationships, are always restless and incomplete. Similar to the way 'the mundane' for Rushdie acquires 'numinous qualities', so the mundane experiences of the body, such as

⁷⁶ Poon, 'Becoming a Global Subject', p. 9.

⁷⁷ Ashley Dawson, 'Cargo Culture: Literature in an Age of Mass Displacement', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 38.1 (2010), 178–193 (p. 183).

⁷⁸ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 11.

talking, seeing, and walking, take on great importance in new territories and with a strong awareness of identity struggle. Throughout the narrative, Z's observations and experiences in new cultural contexts influence her perception of her own body and its place in the world.

Guo's interest in reconstructing space by focusing on bodily experience is clear from the start of the novel. During Z's airplane journey to Britain, her body is depicted as an object that has the ability to float freely in the air, and to relinquish all ties that connect it to a specific place or time zone (p. 3). Once in Britain, the body's movement is complicated by Z's sense of belonging or non-belonging, and material artefacts that place further restrictions on it, such as her passport and visa. The portrayal of the body as an object or 'passive form' open it up to the possibility of being 'endlessly redefined' in the new territory of Britain.⁷⁹

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the body is presented both as a spatial form and a 'powerful statement of resistance'.⁸⁰ During her first interaction with the city space of London, Z remarks that her body is hugely affected by this new place. It becomes old and tired – 'suddenly my body feeling old too' (p. 13). The isolating cultural differences in this unfamiliar place create a sense of invisibility, as she describes herself as 'walking around like a ghost' (p. 14). The novel engages with the theme of the invisibility of the female body, particularly in the context of migration and cultural adaptation. By portraying Z's sense of physical and social invisibility, the narrative sheds light on broader issues of identity, belonging, and the often overlooked struggles faced by women in new cultural landscapes. As Alex Tickell argues, this can also be seen as a commentary on the 'cultural invisibility of the long-standing Chinese community in Britain'.⁸¹ By focusing on the body's invisibility and its redefinition in new cultural territories, Guo performs an act of resistance against broader forms of oppression and exclusion.

⁷⁹ Sara Upstone, *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. 151. In her discussion of 'the colonial body' as a hybrid form subject to the same ordering processes 'used in the appropriation of homes, journeys, nations, and cities', Upstone argues that, in connection with Euclidean space and René Descartes' definition of the body, the body can be viewed as a 'passive entity that could be seized and appropriated'.

⁸⁰ Upstone, *Spatial Politics*, p. 147.

⁸¹ Tickell, p. 77.

This exploration serves to emphasize the alienation and transformation that can accompany the experience of moving to a new and different place, where one's familiar identity may no longer seem to fit. In London, Z is haunted by the cultural restrictions placed on her body, but she gradually realizes that she can change and acquire more agency. Reflecting on her initial days in the new country, she notes: 'first three days in this country, wherever I walk, the voice from my parents echo my ears: "No talking strangers." [...] That my past life. Life before in China' (p. 18). This internal struggle signifies the lingering influence of her upbringing and the challenge of adapting to a new cultural environment. As she continues to navigate her new surroundings, she experiences moments of liberation and self-discovery. Symbolically, she comments, 'I take off my guilty shoes' (p. 50), indicating a conscious shedding of the burdens and guilt imposed by her Chinese culture, which is represented, in this instance, by the Cantonese family she lives with in Tottenham Hale. This act demonstrates her awareness of the need to reclaim her identity and assert her independence, even though her new cultural surroundings make her feel invisible and out of place. It is only in Britain that she notices that her bodily features are now markers of her difference and alienation from mainstream culture: 'As long as one has black eyes and black hair, obsessed by rice, [...] then he or she is a typical Chinese' (p. 186). The way she is constantly reminded of her mother's voice telling her that she is 'an ugly peasant girl' (p. 60) highlights her sense of otherness. This positioning makes Z feel like a 'familiar stranger' not able to reclaim a Chinese nor a British identity (as discussed earlier in the chapter). Z needs to challenge or even transcend this imposed identity, in order to transform her identity and find her footing in Britain.

Z's struggles in Britain find expression through striking visual representations of the body. Describing her cultural isolation and struggle to learn English, she explains that it 'is like seeing my two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at same time. Yes, I not lonely, because I with another me. Like Austin Power with his Mini Me' (p. 33). Referencing Austin Powers in this context is very expressive. It signals a transition, and the beginning of a transformation in Z's identity. She starts to perceive herself as having two identities, and the mini version continues to grow and gain more agency as she learns English and becomes better acquainted with her new cultural surroundings. The representation of her lips as fragmented body parts, divided into two separate pieces, could signify the fracturing of the

self and the struggle to express oneself in two different cultures or languages. Fragmented lips might also symbolize an internal conflict or struggle. This can be related to having competing desires, thoughts or identities that all coexist at the same time. Rachael Gilmour argues that Guo's use of 'lips' has double significance 'as the site both of articulation and of female sexuality', and that such representation is embedded with 'gender, sexuality, and self-authorship'.⁸² Therefore, acknowledging the existence of these fragmented lips that speak two different languages might be seen as the first step in Z's journey towards 'self-authorship' or becoming a writer in her own right and gaining more agency, which is enriched through Guo's engagement with Pygmalion myth, as explained above.

It is telling that Z is drawn to the cinema as a mode of entertainment to ease her initial loneliness and isolation in London. She explains 'cinema is my paradise. When a person not having any idea about real life, just walk into cinema' (p. 40). Despite her inability to understand the English dialogue, she is captivated by this predominantly visual medium of expression. Her perceptions of the visual images she sees in the cinema are comically at odds with the real meaning of what she is watching, as her culturally based assumptions are rooted in Chinese social norms rather than Western, British, or American values. From the surrealist thriller *Mulholland Drive* and the darkly erotic *Blue Velvet*, movies directed by David Lynch, she takes only the message that it is not a good idea to walk on highways alone at night (p. 41). Out of these films' densely-packed layers of irony and allusive dialogue, Z emerges with only a visual image that leaves her more confused and lost.

She is equally out of her depth when trying to understand the social comedies *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Some Like It Hot*, again reducing these highly polished films to absurdly simplistic visual imagery based on physical appearance: '*Breakfast at Tiffany* where posh woman dressing like prostitute and *Some Like It Hot* where mans dressing like womans' (p. 41). Over and over again, Guo highlights Z's failure to comprehend complex social norms and the rituals encoded in the visual presentation of characters and their bodies, as well as her tendency to reduce to a simple visual image things that she does not fully understand. It is clear that her interpretations are in part projections of her own

⁸² Gilmour, 'Living between languages', p. 220.

cultural assumptions. It is Z's previously conceived cultural codes that causes her to perceive the central character in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* as dressing like a prostitute. Her misconceptions and the way she processes visual cues emphasize her struggle with cultural and personal identity in her new environment, where her body and the bodies she observes become central to her understanding of herself and the world around her. In Britain, Z 'is obliged to revise her value judgments, moral values and taboos in the process of self-discovery'.⁸³

These previously conceived cultural codes can explain Z's reaction to her lover's sculptures, which strike her, at least initially, as disturbing and disquieting, because they are so much at odds with the conventional expectations of representation inherent in Chinese culture. They are at odds with her own culturally derived expectations of representation of the human body. This strongly suggests that her concern is driven by a deep-seated and unexamined view, encoded in her own cultural identity, of visual images and representations of the human body as complete, discrete units.⁸⁴

Living with her English lover, Z realises that these sculptures reflect how his world is very much centred upon physical, tangible aspects of masculinity: 'Your happiness is from your own world, from your physical object, from the molded male head, male arms, male leg, male attraction ... your happiness is from your masculine world, and in that world you feel everything is under the control' (p. 192). This realisation contrasts her earlier dismissal of the sculptures, which was affected by her cultural norms. Z interprets the sculptures as an expression of her lover's investment in a particular version of masculinity, thus she demonstrates a keen interest, and an understanding of art forms as means of self-expression. The novel draws attention to the way different art forms, rooted in cultural identity, interact with her sense of self when she moves to a new place. The interplay between self-expression through art, identity, and agency is complicated by the way Guo engages with the Pygmalion myth and her depiction of fragmented body images in the novel. It is interesting that the English lover who is obsessed with 'ugly sculptures' of

⁸³ Töngür, p. 176.

⁸⁴ Lera Boroditsky, 'Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time', *Cognitive Psychology*, 43.1 (2001), 1–22 (pp. 1–2).

deformed body parts is turned into a static, generic artist with no agency, while Z becomes a dynamic, evolving writer.

Z's sense of self and her struggle to belong in Britain is deeply embedded in her bodily experiences: 'I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me' (p. 143). Being swallowed, a physical bodily act, and raped, a physical violation, by the surrounding English culture indicates the intensity of Z's identity struggle, and how limited her agency becomes in relation to the cultural struggle she faces. However, shifting her focus from the relationship with her English lover where she often felt as an 'obscure nobody with name starts from Z' and hoped that 'this romance with [her English lover] put some weight into [her] life' (p. 147), to positioning herself against the dominant culture in Britain, shows Z's strong desire to achieve subjectivity. Through her imagery and expression, Z transforms her body into a site of powerful resistance. The visceral, physical depiction of being overwhelmed by the English culture can be seen as an awareness and an articulation of a resistant desire to maintain independent subjectivity and gain more agency as a cosmopolitan individual in Britain.

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, 'Drifting' (p. 90), 'living in the present' (p. 107), 'privacy' (p. 106), 'freedom' (p. 196), and 'loneliness' (p. 222) are all presented as spatial motifs that set the parameters of living in London from the point view of a white British man.⁸⁵ This emphasises the racial and gendered argument that is at stake in Z's relationship with her English lover and her broader struggle to avoid being swallowed up by the enormity of English culture. The way Z refers to her body as the 'colony' (p. 131) of her English lover reinforces her cultural struggle and the sense of male power over the female body, and her own loss of control.⁸⁶ However, Guo challenges the 'tendency to perceive women as passive recipients of masculine authority',⁸⁷ by showing that Z is capable

⁸⁵ See: Elizabeth Ho, "The Geography Helps": Affective Geographies and Maps in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, in *Affective Geographies and Narratives of Chinese Diaspora*, ed. by Melody Yunzi Li and Robert T. Tally Jr. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 11-30 (p. 12).

⁸⁶ See: Poon, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Núria Codina Solà, 'Intertextuality, World Literature and Migration: Dictionaries and the Female Body in Najat El Hachmi's *L'últim Patriarca* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Interventions* (2023), 1-19 (p. 13).

of changing her identity and her perception of her life with her English lover and the British culture at large. Once she returns from her trip to Europe, she declares:

We [Z and her English lover] are not one body anymore. This is the first time I feel this. There is a big obsessed “self” separating itself from my body and looking at your body [...] here in this rainy old capitalism country, “self” means everything. “self” is the original creativity for everything. Art, business, fashion, society system, all deeply depend on this “self”. The connection between the world and “self” is so strong. “Self” works incredibly well. (p. 268-70)

This ‘big obsessed self’ shows Z’s growing awareness of her subjectivity and the way her travels have enabled her to gain more agency. It is no longer simply her relationship with the English lover that connects her to Britain. Rather, her creativity and self-expression that help her carve out a sense of belonging to Britain as a cosmopolitan individual.

Z realises that she can gain more agency and control over her body by using art and writing to overcome the ‘rainy old capitalism country’ and the overtly masculine world of her English lover: ‘I suddenly understand that you must be suffered a lot from me, because I am so forceful and demanding on words too’ (p. 147). This realisation is given full expression during her trip to Europe. The English lover sends her to Europe to see ‘a bit of the world without [him]’ (p. 198), indicating that his effect on Z’s conceptualization of space is limited when she travels to Europe. She soon realises that she can achieve independence through mundane physical acts: ‘I can be on my own. I can. I can rely on myself, without depending on a man’ (p. 245). In Venice, she enjoys the sense of freedom and having complete control over her body and movement. She comments: ‘The morning is never been so bright and fresh to me. The wind is blowing my yellow skin. I feel free. I feel my body is entirely free’ (p. 239). This complete bodily freedom in Europe contrasts with her sense of being overwhelmed by English culture that makes her shrink, swallows her up, and is even comparable to the violation (and violence) of rape.

This newfound freedom highlights her journey towards self-empowerment. Art and writing become tools through which she can express herself and reclaim her body from the constraints previously imposed on her by the English culture in London, by her lover, and by different cultural expectations. By exploring Europe independently, Z discovers a broader

world, where she can redefine her identity and body on her own terms. The physical acts of navigating new spaces and engaging with her environment without reliance on a man mark significant steps in her journey towards autonomy and self-discovery.

Her experiences in Venice symbolize this transformation. The bright and fresh morning, the wind on her skin, and her declaration of bodily freedom illustrate a profound shift in her relationship with her own body. She no longer feels confined or controlled by external forces, but instead embraces her own physical presence and the agency that comes with it. This transformation underscores the novel's themes of agency, cultural adaptation, and the reclamation of one's own body and identity.

In Europe, Z is empowered by creativity, in the form of mapping, and sexual agency. Her remapping of Europe shows that during her trip, she is positioned as a participant in the creation of meaning rather than a bystander: 'Z's maps also mark locations where contestation and control of space and the female body proliferate and problematize what counts as the imagined geography of "Europe"'.⁸⁸ In Z's hand drawn maps national boundaries are reconfigured to reflect her growing awareness of her cosmopolitan identity and agency. For instance, in Berlin, which she describes as 'a city made for mans, and politics, and disciplines. Like Beijing.' (p. 218), she meets Klaus, a man from west Germany with whom she lives for a couple of days. Her encounter with Klaus enables her to understand what it means to 'want to be far away from the past.' (p. 217). To capture this desire to reimagine her past, Z draws a map of Berlin with a wall separating the city into West and East, which can be seen as both a play on the Berlin Wall and the great wall of China. She describes the wall as having an 'ugly' presence (p. 228). This wall is a reminder of her sense of cultural isolation in London and her English lover: 'I am building the Great Wall around you and me because I am too scared to lose the home.' (p. 127). In Europe, she realises that building this wall does not give her a home but rather hinders her growth and her ability to connect with the world. Locating herself in Berlin's urban space allows Z to reflect on her position and to express herself more freely. She is a young woman in a city built for men, a tourist, a student, a temporary resident in Europe. The way she reimagines the borders of Europe shows that Z's mapping is 'circumscribed by gender, nationality, race,

⁸⁸ Ho, p. 12.

and various official apparatuses of border control'.⁸⁹ So, instead of 'trying draw map of [the English lover], map of [his] past' (p. 97), she draws her own creative maps that reflect her evolving identity as a cosmopolitan individual.

After her trip to Europe, she seems to transcend the restrictions and limits placed on her body by the English culture and by the English lover. She has 'broken the chains of male dominance and interference in [her] decisions, preferences and life-styles'.⁹⁰ She realises that she has regained her agency and complete control over her body: 'The night when our bodies lie down side by side, I feel I am detached. We are not one body anymore.' (p. 268). This physical and emotional detachment shows that Z no longer depends on her English lover to survive in Britain. She has gained enough agency to create her own path. She is now 'free from the absolute superiority of the English culture that haunts [her] cosmopolitan desire in the form of her British lover'.⁹¹

The novel aims to 'reconfigure the body's significance in a way that marks the ultimate reduction of spatial scales, as the site of greatest colonisation becomes a resource facilitating the most powerful statement of resistance'.⁹² Z's body becomes a marker of her personal transformation, a 'broken mirror' reflecting the complex interaction between identity, language, culture, and the sense of belonging. Like Rushdie's 'broken mirror' the novel comprises fragmented memories recounted by Z about the year she spent in London and travelling around Europe. However, these memories are not stable, but keep changing and shifting, reflecting various meanings and interpretations. With regard to her English lover, Z explains that the 'memory keeps a portrait about you. An abstract portrait like pictures I saw in Tate Modern, blur details and sketchy lines. I start draw this picture, but my memory about you keep changing and I have to change the picture' (p. 58). Through these memories, she has the power to rewrite her own story. This finds expression very specifically in connection to imagery of the body and how Z herself perceives them.

⁸⁹ Ho, p. 14.

⁹⁰ Töngür, p. 178.

⁹¹ Yifan Jin, 'Deterritorializing Hegemonic Globalization Progressively in Xiaolu Guo's Experimental Writing: A Comparative Reading of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* and *A Lover's Discourse*', *Studies In Contemporary Fiction*, 65.2 (2024), pp. 248–60 (p. 249).

⁹² Upstone, *Spatial Politics*, p. 147.

Conclusion

Language, and the way speakers of different languages process thoughts, images, and perceptions of the world and themselves, is a central theme of Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, a theme that is the focus of much of the critical work published about the novel.⁹³ However, my focus in this chapter is on intercultural encounters and how they facilitate the creation of identity and complicate understandings of Englishness and Britishness. By exploring the perspective of a Chinese student as she struggles to create a sense of belonging in London, Guo participates in the development of a literary tradition that pushes beyond a critical tendency to focus on South Asian British and immigrant writing, enriching our understanding of immigration and identity in the 2000s. Alex Tickell argues that Guo was unable to draw on similar literary traditions or writings when she first started publishing in English because 'British Chinese writing was certainly not available to Guo at the start of her career as a set of pre-existing creative reference-points or influences'.⁹⁴ Paying more attention to Chinese immigrants as an ethnic or cultural group who rarely feature in discussions of Englishness or Britishness has the potential to shift understanding of the 2000s as a literary period.

In the introduction to his book *China Fictions, English Language Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*, Robert Lee asks a very important question that summarizes British-Chinese writers' struggle to secure recognition: 'does being an "ethnic" Chinese writer automatically mean periphery, non-canon, the purveying of an edge culture?'⁹⁵ Lee's question indicates how East Asian British and immigrant writers have been relegated to the margins in critical accounts of Black and Asian British writing in the late twentieth and early

⁹³ For example: Eunju Hwang, 'Love and Shame: Transcultural Communication and Its Failure in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Ariel*, 43.4 (2013), 69–95; Lea Sinoimeri, 'Beyond the Mother Tongue: Language as Cultural Capital in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 21.6 (2021), 734–48; Rachael Gilmour, 'Living Between Languages: The Politics of Translation in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.2 (2012), 207–27; A. Nejat Töngür, 'Sorry of my English: Lily and Mui in *Sour Sweet* and Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*', *Edebiyat Fakültesi dergisi*, 29.2 (2012), 167–80.

⁹⁴ Tickell, p. 77.

⁹⁵ A. Robert Lee, *China Fictions, English Language: Literary Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 11.

twenty-first century. Guo has said in an interview that she still has a lot to say and that as a writer she is 'much heavier and angrier than people imagine.'⁹⁶ Giving more prominence to East Asian British writers like Guo allows for a better understanding of the 2000s as a literary period and enriches analysis of literary representations of immigrants' struggle to create a sense of belonging in Britain.

In her writing, Guo explores 'the literary aesthetics of contemporary multilingual writers for whom writing and surviving in the West means acquiring the language and appropriating the books of the received British and European literary canon.'⁹⁷ Her artistic and stylistic choices are affected by multiple cultural backgrounds and the different languages she speaks. She needs to navigate these different cultural and linguistic barriers in order to 'survive' or establish a recognizable literary career. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo employs her multilingualism to disrupt the conventions of the English language. She uses language to empower her protagonist, though the notion of 'transruption', where she turns her novel into a site of cultural contestation that unsettles conventional social norms and ideas of homogeneity.⁹⁸ By undermining the traditional use of English and giving her protagonist enough agency to express herself through writing, 'the English language is subverted through this process, a transruption that dismantles the rhetoric of race.'⁹⁹

Z's declaration at the end of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* that she might 'never go back to England [...] Yes, the geography helps a lot. I know the best thing to do is to let each other go, to let us live on a different planet, parallel lives, no more crossing over,' (p. 353) reveals a great deal about her cosmopolitan perspective. The novel challenges a concept of London as a place of settlement and prosperity, a common element in popular immigrants' narratives published in the 2000s. Guo depicts the city as a place of 'crossing over' to other places in Britain and to Europe. Her protagonist travels across Europe as a tourist and uses her creative powers to remap the borders of Europe and

⁹⁶ Xiaolu Guo cited in: Ommandsen, 'From China with Love', p. 340.

⁹⁷ Sinoimeri, p. 746.

⁹⁸ Pramod Nayar, 'The Transnational Indian Novel in English', in *Imagined Identities: Identity Formation in the Age of Globalisation*, ed. by Gonul Pultar (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 17–32 (p. 26).

⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 26–7.

expand them to accommodate her perspective and the way she positions her body in the world. It is her movement that fuels her cosmopolitan living. After returning to China, Z reflects that 'there are no more boundaries between nations' (pp. 349– 50), and that she does not have to live permanently in England for her perspective to matter. However, this focus on mobility 'Does not preclude locality from being a powerful frame for the organization of meanings. Locality and mobility co-exist, and whenever we observe patterns of mobility we have to examine the local environment in which they occur.'¹⁰⁰ In this context, I have examined the novel in connection to London to complicate understanding of multiculturalism in Britain in the 2000s.

Describing what it means to be a 'multiculturalist' at the turn of the century, Bhikhu Parekh argues that:

For the multiculturalist, we are human beings but also cultural beings, born and raised within and shaped by a thick culture, which we can no doubt revise and even reject but only by embracing some other culture. [...] By engaging in a critically sympathetic dialogue with other cultures, it [the culture] comes to appreciate its own strengths and limitations, becomes conscious of what is distinctive to it as well as what it shares in common with them, and enjoys the opportunity to enrich itself by judiciously borrowing from them what it finds attractive and can easily assimilate.¹⁰¹

Parekh contends that cultural identity is shaped by the different cultures a person interacts with and that interacting with different cultures provides an opportunity to revise or even reject one's own culture.

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo creates a fresh cosmopolitan perspective through her redefinition of Englishness and Britishness in connection to Europe, her disregard for the grammatical rules of English, her engagement with the Pygmalion myth, and her depiction of the body in pieces. Guo's novel spans across multiple spaces, geographical borders, languages, and narrative forms to convey a complex understanding of identity and belonging. The crossing of different genres including the diary, the dictionary, the novel, the autobiography, travel writing, and the bildungsroman encapsulates Guo's

¹⁰⁰ Jan Blommaert, *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 22.

¹⁰¹ Bhikhu Parekh, 'Barry and the Dangers of Liberalism', in *Multiculturalism Reconsidered: 'Culture and Equality' and Its Critics*, ed. by Paul Joseph Kelly (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 133–50 (p. 141).

creativity and her wish to depart from conventional narrative form. The novel imaginatively tackles notions of immigration through the experiences of students rather than permanent settlers, which adds depth and complexity to concepts of Britishness, assimilation, and belonging. Guo's work also serves as an exploration of transnational identities complicated by language and border crossing.

Brexit Postscript: Fragmentation, Belonging, and Cosmopolitanism in Xiaolu Guo's *A Lover's Discourse*

In light of the 2016 Brexit referendum, it is striking how Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) anticipates debates around identity, belonging, and transnational mobility. The novel presents its protagonist Z's evolving identity in Britain as shaped by open borders and free movement between Britain and Europe. Z expresses a desire 'to be a citizen of the world' (p. 187), a sentiment that clashes with Theresa May's 2016 declaration that citizens of the world are 'citizens of nowhere'.¹⁰² Z's expression reveals the novel's perceptive commentary on the charged debates about Britishness and a more sublimated idea of Englishness that emerged to the surface with the European referendum.

Guo's later work, *A Lover's Discourse* (2020),¹⁰³ revisits these questions in the context of post-Brexit uncertainty. Written during the UK's political shift, the novel reflects Guo's own frustrations, as she explained in a 2022 interview with Angus Phillips: having commuted between the UK and Germany before Brexit, she realized afterward that 'she could not really work in Europe anymore.'¹⁰⁴ Brexit, she notes, became inescapably 'present,' shaping her characters' inner and outer worlds.¹⁰⁵ The result is a narrative in which personal relationships are inseparable from geopolitical fractures.

¹⁰² 'Theresa May's Conference Speech in Full', *Daily Telegraph*, 05 October 2016
<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/>> [accessed 04 August 2024].

¹⁰³ Xiaolu Guo, *A Lover's Discourse* (London, Vintage, 2020).

¹⁰⁴ In: Thomas Godfrey, 'Xiaolu Guo: "My first identity is as a writer"', *Hybrid Magazine*, 11 April 2022, <<https://www.hybridmag.co.uk/p/xiaolu-guo-my-first-identity-is-as->> [accessed 12 April 2025].

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Stylistically and thematically, *A Lover's Discourse* echoes *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* but responds to a more fractured cultural moment. Both novels follow Chinese women navigating life and love in Britain, drawing from Guo's own experience as a migrant writer. Yet while Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* navigates a pre-Brexit Britain that allows for movement, confusion, and eventual anchoring, the unnamed narrator in *A Lover's Discourse* inhabits a post-Brexit terrain marked by fragmentation, restriction, and existential instability. The events of the narrative start six months before the referendum vote in 2015 London. The narrator, an unnamed Chinese PhD student in visual anthropology, explores the unfamiliar city, grappling with cultural differences, language barriers, and a shifting sense of self.

Like Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, this unnamed narrator struggles with London's transport system and wonders if the London Wall is anything like the Great Wall of China. She also tries to find 'Brexit' in her dictionary. Guo explores some of the fears and instabilities in post Brexit Britain through her protagonist, who describes Britain as a new strange 'non-European world' (p. 15). The phrase carries significant implications when situated in the post-Brexit context and in conversation with Edward Said's *Freud and the Non-European*,¹⁰⁶ Britain is no longer a reference point of centrality but a place of estrangement, struggle, and exclusion. Guo subtly critiques Euroscepticism and the nationalist retreat from cosmopolitanism, implying that Brexit has rendered Britain alien even to itself.

The unnamed narrator in *A Lover's Discourse* declares at the beginning of the novel that she 'wanted to equip [herself] with an intellectual mind so that [she] could enter a foreign land and not be lost in it. [She] would have a stance or mission, a way of navigating as an outsider' (p. 7). This fear of losing herself, which she seeks to mitigate by maintaining her 'stance' and perspective 'as an outsider', speaks to a form of self-preservation and resistance in the face of a society that is not only foreign but potentially hostile. She does not seek to assimilate unquestioningly, but rather to observe critically, retain her difference, and navigate Britain with a sense of intellectual agency. This aligns with the broader cultural anxieties post-Brexit—uncertainty about place, identity, and the future of multicultural

¹⁰⁶ Edward W Said. *Freud and the Non-European* (Verso, in association with the Freud Museum, London, 2003).

coexistence. In a sense, it contrasts with Z's journey in pre-Brexit Britain. Z was able to lose her reference in the West and regain it through freedom of movement in Europe and Wales. The unnamed student in *A Lover's Discourse* meets a half-Australian, half-German landscape architect, who lives in London, and a love affair begins. Their life together on a houseboat symbolizes a sense of rootlessness and instability in post-Brexit Britain. It contrasts with Z's more grounded position in her English lover's house, which allows her to put down roots by planting Chinese cabbages in his garden. The boat's movement and temporariness resist notions of settlement, anchoring, or long-term stability, suggesting that for migrants in post-Brexit Britain, home becomes a fluid, provisional state rather than a secure place of integration. The fluid, unanchored existence of *A Lover's Discourse's* protagonist echoes the broader uncertainties of the time.

Both *A Lover's Discourse* and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* employ a fragmented, lexicographic structure—brief entries, reflections, and non-linear episodes. But *A Lover's Discourse* leans further into fragmentation. In an interview with Jae-Yeon Yoo, Guo stated that she sought to write a text that mirrors the fragmentation found in Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*.¹⁰⁷ *A Lover's Discourse* unfolds through untitled, loosely connected fragments, shifting between inner monologue, remembered dialogue, cultural commentary, and philosophical contemplation. The narrative mimics the wandering, unsettled mind of its narrator, who is linguistically and geographically displaced. As Alex Tickell notes, Guo's broken form reflects 'a sophisticated economic and political critique' of her status as a migrant artist.¹⁰⁸ In both novels, fragmented language and form mirror the fractured self: a migrant caught between geographies, identities, and tongues.

Brexit is not a mere backdrop in *A Lover's Discourse*—it becomes a symbolic terrain upon which notions of belonging, exclusion, and resistance are negotiated. The narrator's perspective on Britain is shaped by her training as a social scientist and anthropologist, critiquing British class divisions, multiculturalism, and xenophobia from within. She does not

¹⁰⁷ Xiaolu Guo in conversation with Jae-Yeon Yoo, 'Translating Love in the Time of Brexit', *Electric Lit*, 22 October 2020, <<https://electricliterature.com/xiaolu-guo-novel-lovers-discourse/>> [accessed 29 April 2025].

¹⁰⁸ Tickell, Alex, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Transnational Reproduction: Form and Intertextuality in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* and *A Lover's Discourse*', *Studies in the Novel*, 55.1 (2023), p. 82.

attempt to understand British culture through visual art as Z once did; instead, she interrogates it, exposing its contradictions. Her interpretation of the Brexit message—'Go home, jobless people. Go home, foreigners. Go home, losers'—lays bare the emotional undercurrent of the nationalistic rhetoric (p. 251).

Such alienation is experienced through bureaucratic encounters, housing insecurity, and linguistic confusion. The narrator reflects that 'London was the most fenced city [she] had ever seen or lived in' (p. 53), an observation that echoes Zadie Smith's description of London in 'Fences: A Brexit Diary', published in *The New York Review of Books* (August 2016). Smith argues that the European referendum exposed the 'painful truth [...] that fences are being raised everywhere in London' and showed 'a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making.'¹⁰⁹

Also, the narrator of *A Lover's Discourse* questions the logic of English idioms, and reflects on how even linguistic fluency does not guarantee cultural belonging, 'Why can't I hold on to one language while gaining another?' she asks, 'Why do I have to lose one first?' (p. 45). Even after she gets married, has a British child, and chooses London as her permanent home, she still feels distanced from English: 'I could not possess this language. It alienated me and it was never mine' (p. 167), which further highlights the linguistic and emotional burden inherited through immigration.

In the interview with Angus Phillips mentioned above, Guo explains 'once you leave your country, everywhere is sort of the same, because it's never the first country – everywhere you adopt is secondary'.¹¹⁰ This resonates with her unnamed narrator's encounter with UK immigration. The way she is scrutinized by the officers further underscores her exclusion. She observes, 'the immigration officer asked endless questions about my UK visa' (p. 163), a reminder of her secondary status 'in a white European world' (p. 198). This sustained marginality stands in contrast to her partner's privileged mobility as a white European.

¹⁰⁹ Zadie Smith, 'Fences: A Brexit Diary', *New York Review of Books* (2016), available online: <[https://www-nybooks-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/](https://www.nybooks-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/)> [accessed 20 May 2023].

¹¹⁰ In Godfrey.

Yet *A Lover's Discourse* does more than document alienation and the struggle to belong, it creates cosmopolitan characters. The narrator insists, 'I wanted my adult life to be in Europe' (p. 87), not as a temporary visitor but as a rooted cosmopolitan subject. She explains that she 'felt the need to make a family in the West. The need to put down roots' (p. 204). Still, Guo does not idealize this cosmopolitan vision. The narrator remains aware of its uneven terms: 'Even if one day I could master a foreign language [...] I would still not become a primary citizen of the West' (p. 198). In this way, *A Lover's Discourse* enacts what Ulrich Beck calls a 'cosmopolitan constellation'—the coexistence of 'rival lifestyles, contradictory certainties in the experiential space of individuals'.¹¹¹

The houseboat the narrator and her husband share on London canals symbolizes their emotional and political positioning. Both characters are outsiders in Britain, living 'a life without roots' (p. 116), and navigating a shared yet uncertain future in a socially and politically unstable country. As Aida Edemariam¹¹² and Mike Cormack¹¹³ both note in their reviews of the novel, Guo's work is a meditation not only on love and language but on how one builds a home in a place that continually reminds you that you don't belong. As the narrator remarks, other European citizens and immigrants would express anger and intensity whenever Brexit is mentioned. Even at the pharmacy, people complain that they are 'Brexhausted. Everybody has started to hoard medicines [...] we knew nothing of what our future would be in this country' (p. 251). Moreover, multiculturalism becomes a distant concept, as the narrator describes standing in the civil registration office: 'This was the first time I had physically (not just mentally) experienced this word: multiculturalism' (p. 233). In this context, the houseboat becomes a fragile space of belonging amidst a climate of uncertainty and division.

¹¹¹ In: Yifan Jin, 'Deterritorializing Hegemonic Globalization Progressively in Xiaolu Guo's Experimental Writing: A Comparative Reading of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* and *A Lover's Discourse*', *Critique - Bolingbroke Society*, 65.2 (2024), p. 257.

¹¹² Aida Edemariam 'A Lover's Discourse by Xiaolu Guo Review - Cross-Cultural Echoes: The Story of a Chinese Woman in London Becomes a Meditation on Language and Desire', *The Guardian*, 10 October 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/10/a-lovers-discourse-by-xiaolu-guo-review-cross-cultural-echoes>> [accessed 29 April 2025].

¹¹³ Mike Cormack, 'A Lover's Discourse by Xiaolu Guo – Review', *The Spectator*, 8 August 2020, <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/poetic-miniatures-a-lover-s-discourse-by-xiaolu-guo-reviewed/>> [accessed 29 April 2025].

Despite all these difficulties and uncertainties, London is still depicted as a place of hope. After moving to Germany, buying a house, and planting a Chinese garden—much like in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*—the narrator plants Chinese bamboo in an attempt to feel rooted in her new home (p. 258). Yet she still cannot recreate the same sense of belonging she experienced in London. Alone, standing in front of a mirror, she sees ‘a ghostly pale-looking woman’ (p. 221), and decides that she can no longer stay in Germany and needs to return to London. When her German husband asks, ‘Why do you want to return to Brexit Britain?’ she answers, ‘London was the place I had begun my adult life, the place I had finally realised that I had forever lost my parents and my home country’ (p. 265). Therefore, London—fractured and foreign—becomes a site of personal growth, grief, language, and the difficult but persistent search for belonging.

Ultimately, Guo’s *A Lover’s Discourse* offers no resolution to the crises it reflects. Instead, it lingers in the uncomfortable liminality between home and exile, self and other, speech and silence. Guo’s characters do not fuse into a unified identity; they remain distinct, their connection forged in negotiation, not assimilation. In doing so, Guo challenges the logic of Brexit itself, with its insistence on purity, sovereignty, and control. Through her intimate, fragmentary storytelling, Guo constructs an alternative form of belonging—one rooted not in territory or shared ancestry, but in language, vulnerability, and the radical openness.

Future research could investigate how Guo’s evolving narrative style reflects not only her maturation as a writer but also the shifting political and cultural landscape in Britain. While *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* documents a language learner’s struggle to adapt, *A Lover’s Discourse* depicts a more complex linguistic negotiation that remains unsettled and freighted with loss. Research might consider how language operates not just as a barrier, but as a site of both empowerment and alienation in migrant literature—particularly in post-Brexit contexts where cultural otherness has become increasingly politicized.

Conclusion: Reflections After Brexit

I believe in the power of words, and for me my words are actions, so the two are not mutually exclusive. It's a way of making a contribution. For me, it's the same as marching. (Jackie Kay, 2013)¹

I have been separated from my original languages. I can say that I have a new language now, but I cannot say that it is my own. To have a life of my own, is to have a language of my own. To make this language mine, I have to recover the languages I have lost, weave them into the present. An impossible task, perhaps. Still, here I am, in pursuit of an etymology of myself. (Xiaolu Guo, *Radical: A Life of My Own*)²

My investigation in this thesis provides a deep understanding of the themes of language, movement, identity, and belonging in the works of selected Black and Asian British women writers in the 2000s. I have carried out extensive analysis of Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted* (2007), Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road* (2010) and *Wish I Was Here* (2006), and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). This thesis has argued for a shift of focus from a handful of celebrated writers in the 2000s to other Black and Asian British writers who did not receive enough critical attention. I have explored the different forms of Britishness, Welshness, Scottishness, and Englishness my selected authors engage with, as well as the way they explore under-represented forms of racism and social prejudices that contributed to the UK's decision to leave the European Union and that continue to cause division and social unrest within the British nations. I have conducted a multi-genre investigation by examining two novels, a memoir, and a short story collection. In this conclusion, I track shifts in the discourse about Britishness and Black and Asian British writings between the 2000s and the 2010s to highlight how my analysis of Lalwani, Kay, and Guo has been influenced by

¹ Quoted in: Janet Christie, 'Jackie Kay, Using Poetry to Help Female Asylum Seekers', *The Scotsman*, 10 March 2013 <<https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/jackie-kay-using-poetry-to-help-female-asylum-seekers-1586360>> [accessed 02 August 2024].

² Xiaolu Guo, *Radical: A Life of My Own* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2023), p. ix.

later publications that engage with the social and political changes instigated by the 2016 Brexit vote. By exploring these recent works, I aim to underscore the continuing relevance of the cultural representations of nation, race, and identity developed by the authors explored in this thesis, while also highlighting how these writers continue to envision or reimagine the future of Britain. Overall, by discussing Lalwani, Kay, and Guo, this thesis has attempted to identify the key trends that limited the reach of British multiculturalism in the 2000s and to shift the critical discourse towards a more inclusive view that encompasses voices from cultural backgrounds beyond South Asian and Afro-Caribbean, and perspectives from all the British nations.

The objective of this thesis was to explore the fragmented nature of the concept of Britishness in the 2000s by focusing on writers from the devolved nations and exploring literary representations of locations other than London. Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's works are read through Salman Rushdie's theorization of the 'broken mirror' in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands'³ and Du Bois's conceptualization of 'double consciousness' in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁴ Both Rushdie and Du Bois discuss the multiplicity inherent in identity and focus on the duality of existence that ethnic minority people are forced into within racialized societies. These individuals often find themselves in a position of having to negotiate multiple reflections of their identities while being alienated from the mainstream culture. In this thesis, Lalwani, Kay, and Guo each offer a lens that presents a different way to view what it means to live between different cultures and languages, and to claim belonging in one of Britain's devolved nations and their rather alienating cultural surroundings.

This study aimed to demonstrate the significance of the selected authors and to argue that incorporating their works into the existing scholarly discourse on Black and Asian British writers enhances our understanding of the cultural and social dynamics that prevailed at the turn of the millennium. A key rationale for focusing on Lalwani, Kay, and Guo was that their works critically engage with the lives of Black and Asian minorities in the devolved nations of Britain, with a focus on often-overlooked forms of racism and social prejudices. I have also explored how the popularity of writers such as Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, and

³ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1991), p. 11.

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Monica Ali influenced the publishing industry at the turn of the millennium. The public and critical celebration of Smith, Levy, and Ali has created a rather narrow lens, as discussed in the thesis introduction, that has tended to celebrate a certain type of British multiculturalism that focused on Afro-Caribbean and South Asian perspectives and is London centric. This thesis has made a case for rejecting such narrow view. By examining these underexplored dimensions, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding British identity and cultural production in early twenty-first century by examining writers from the devolved nations who engage with locations other than London and ethnic minority writers (Chinese) who are rarely discussed in relation to Englishness or Britishness.

This thesis has focused on the 2000s due to the importance of the period in shaping critical and public reception of what is known as the multicultural novel, or novels written by ethnic minority writers in Britain. Author Bernardine Evaristo describes the 2000s as the ‘breakthrough’ moment for Black British writers.⁵ In an article titled ‘The Illusion of Inclusion’ published in 2010, Evaristo characterises the publishing industry from the late 1990s until the mid-2000s as looking for ‘the next big thing after the last big thing’. This resulted in many authors having their works published. Of these authors, ‘a couple became big international stars, but most have now disappeared’.⁶ The breakthrough moment in the publishing world that Evaristo describes caused a narrow view that seemed to favour South Asian and Afro-Caribbean writers engaging with England and metropolitan life. The hype that surrounded Smith’s *White Teeth*, Levy’s *Small Island*, and Ali’s *Brick Lane* caused publishing houses to become obsessed with finding the next big thing or even invested in searching for the ‘new Zadie Smith’.⁷ Therefore, the rising popularity of writers such as Smith, Levy, and Ali created rather unfair standards for the multicultural novel against which every other author was judged, a critical view I have challenged in this thesis. This thesis has formed the first sustained investigation of Lalwani, Kay, and Guo side by side and in connection to their engagement with Britishness, Welshness, Scottishness, and Englishness.

⁵ Bernardine Evaristo, ‘The Illusion of Inclusion’, *Wasafiri*, 25.4 (2010), 1–6 (p. 4).

⁶ Ibid, p. 4.

⁷ See for example: Emine Saner, ‘Don’t Call Me the New Zadie’, *The Standard*, 12 April 2012 <<https://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/don-t-call-me-the-new-zadie-7274402.html>> [accessed 24 January 2024].

Throughout the chapters of this study, I have tried to expand the critical work on Black and Asian women writers published in the 2000s. In chapter one, I shown that Lalwani's *Gifted* moves away from the metropolitan English writings that seemed to dominate the 2000s. By setting her novel in Cardiff, Lalwani engages with Wales and Welshness in a way that opens new possibilities for ethnic minority writers. Chapter two illustrated how most of the critical work on Kay's *Red Dust Road* focuses on her adoption story and reads the memoir in connection with her poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers* (1991). I broadened this critical view by reading Kay's memoir alongside her short story collection *Wish I Was Here*, exploring recurring patterns of imagery across the two works and investigating Kay's sustained interest in identity and Scottishness. In chapter three, I deepened the critical view of Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by moving away from a focus on language, that seemed to colour most of the critical work published about the novel, to examine how she engages with Europe and Wales to complicate the understanding of Englishness and Britishness.

In their works, Lalwani, Kay, and Guo focus on individuality, agency, and their protagonists' identity struggles rather than celebrating multiculturalism and the ease of assimilation seen in other popular works in the 2000s. They engage with nation specific themes rather than a unified British identity. By doing so, Lalwani, Kay, and Guo challenge dominant discourses about race, belonging, and cultural identity. By focusing on the nation specific aspects of these works, I have identified some blind spots in the existing literary criticism of Black and Asian British women writings in the 2000s. I have shown that the devolved identities in the 2000s are rather suppressed by a general emphasis on Englishness and Britishness and a tendency to conflate Britain with England.

The thesis intervenes in the critical discourse on Welshness, Scottishness, Englishness, and Britishness by stressing that Lalwani's, Kay's, and Guo's work illustrates that within the devolved nations of Britain, Britishness becomes minor or even 'other'. John McLeod asks an intriguing question in 'Black British Writing and Post-British England': what would be discovered 'if we were to read black British writing for its critique of England rather

than its rewriting of Britain?’⁸ Through the creation of hybrid identities that do not conform to stereotypical measures of belonging in connection to the devolved nations of Britain, my selected texts can be read as a critique of England. The way Lalwani, Kay, and Guo engage with national specific themes and depict their protagonists’ individuality through the use of dialects, mixing English with other languages, and using unconventional spelling of English words, can be seen as a challenge to the tendency to conflate Britishness with Englishness in critical and popular writings in the 2000s. In this thesis, I have read my selected works as a critique of a literary culture that tended to focus on England and was characterised by a celebration of Britishness.

Unlike other popular works by Black and Asian British authors such as Smith and Ali that tend to focus on roots and connections to distant homelands, Lalwani, Kay, and Guo depict cosmopolitan protagonists who express their identities through movement, border crossings, and mixing different cultures and languages. For instance, Lalwani presents Rumi’s journeys to India, her ventures around Cardiff and Oxford, and her struggle between English, Hindi, and to some extent Welsh as key to her ability to make sense of her mixed identity. Lalwani’s, Kay’s, and Guo’s works reveal a more inclusive and fluid understanding of mixed-race identities in connection to the devolved nations of Britain.

This study has investigated critical questions about how race, language, and ethnicity are borders that still create fissures within multicultural Britain. In *Borders: A Very Short Introduction*, Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen suggest that ‘every border has a story. Every line on a map, every marker in the landscape, was derived from some complex negotiation of power and culture’.⁹ I have explored how the protagonists’ crossing of physical, linguistic, and cultural borders create new meanings that complicate common understandings of identity and belonging. For example, Z’s identity is transformed by her trips to Wales and Europe and the novel’s creativity is strengthened by the mixing of Chinese and English. Similarly, Kay often insists that skin colour does not make her or her protagonists’ less Scottish. Through continuous movement and border crossings, the

⁸ John McLeod, ‘Black British Writing and Post-British England’, in *Literature of an Independent England: Revisions of England, Englishness and English Literature*, ed. by Claire Westall and Michael Gardiner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 105–17 (p. 108).

⁹ Alexander C. Diener, and Joshua Hagen, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 55.

protagonists recreate boundaries, making them more fluid and accommodating of differences.

As shown in my reading of Lalwani, Kay, and Guo, language is central to the creation of cultural identities and the forging of a sense of belonging to Britain. All three writers use language in a creative way to reflect different cultural heritages. Lalwani mixes English and Hindi to explore the complexities of cultural identity and depict her protagonist's struggle living between different cultures. Kay asserts her Scottishness through the incorporation of Glaswegian into her writing to fight racism, misrecognition and social prejudices based on skin colour. Guo uses non-standard forms of English and unconventional spelling of English words to show how unstable words are and how meaning can change and alter our understanding of what is deemed normal. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Guo illustrates that acquiring a new language is connected to forging a new identity and to creating new 'references' (p. 157) based on different cultures and social experiences.

In her 2023 memoir *Radical: A Life of My Own*, quoted above, Guo explains that when one learns a new language, one's original language will always be there, affecting how things are understood and how meaning is interpreted. She explains that 'to make [the new] language mine, I have to recover the languages I have lost, weave them into the present. An impossible task, perhaps. Still, here I am, in pursuit of an etymology of myself.'¹⁰ In a sense, Guo acknowledges that being caught between different languages affects her identity formation and forces her to piece together fragments of memory and history. However, she continues to search for the 'etymology' or the roots of her identity that she lost between different languages and cultures. This etymology of the self is connected to how cultural identities are expressed and how a sense of belonging is forged while living between different languages and cultures. Guo's preoccupation with linguistic terms and concepts like 'etymology', 'dictionary', and 'radical' shows how complex identity formation becomes when an individual is caught between multiple languages and how important it is to keep trace of their origin and reconcile the past and the present.

The main aim of this thesis was to place more focus on underrepresented Black and Asian women writers in the 2000s. The works I have explored were published between 2006

¹⁰ Guo, *Radical*, p. ix.

and 2010, a period characterised by a lack of attention to ethnic minority writers who engage with nation specific identities or who do not celebrate multicultural Britishness. Even with the establishment of the BAME writers network in Scotland in 2018, the increased recognition of Black and Asian writers in Wales in 2020, and social and political movements across Britain (such as Black Lives Matter), it seems that there are still many discrepancies between the literary productions of Black and Asian British writers, particularly in the devolved nations, and their recognition and visibility in both mainstream culture and in the publishing industry. For instance, when pondering on Wales's 'mixed up roots' in her 2002 memoir *Sugar and Slate*, Charlotte Williams argues that 'the us and the them of the matter can never be so simple'.¹¹ Williams explains how tangible matters of race and cultural identities are, especially in connection to Black and Asian British individuals in the devolved nations of Britain. She continues to argue that as a Black Welsh writer she feels rendered 'with an invisible present',¹² that seemed to hinder her recognition as an ethnic minority writer. Howard Winant and Michael Omi argue in their book on race formation that 'opposing racism requires that we notice race, not ignore it, that we afford it the recognition it deserves and the subtlety it embodies'.¹³ Therefore, this thesis has attempted to place some focus on Black and Asian British women writers who engage with racism and social prejudice in the devolved nations of Britain and who have not received enough critical attention.

There is still much to be said about Lalwani, Kay, and Guo, especially in regard to how their literary production has been affected by the political changes in Britain since the 2016 European referendum. The referendum has instigated many social and political changes in the United Kingdom. In her inaugural speech at the Conservative Party conference as Prime Minister, Theresa May articulated the rising wave of nationalism that had surged across Britain during the turbulent year of 2016. Criticising the notion of internationalism, which she argued diluted the bonds of citizenship and shared societal responsibilities, May famously declared, 'If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere.'

¹¹ Charlotte Williams, *Sugar and Slate* (Aberystwyth: Planet, 2002), p. 176.

¹² Ibid, p. 177.

¹³ Cited in: Joseph H. Jackson, *Writing Black Scotland: Race, Nation and the Devolution of Black Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 20.

You don't understand what the very word "citizenship" means'.¹⁴ May's remarks represented a clear rejection of the pluralist ideals of multiculturalism that had characterised British politics from the 1990s through the early 2000s. The vision articulated by May called for the reinforcement of vaguely defined 'British values' as a defence against what was perceived as the destabilising influence of foreign values and traditions. This shift signalled a move away from embracing multiculturalism towards a more insular and exclusive definition of British identity.

Many writers and literary critics have expressed their disbelief and unease regarding the results of the Brexit vote. In an article in *The Guardian* 'Reading After the Referendum' (discussed in the introduction of this thesis), Jackie Kay describes the 2016 political events as 'a bereavement [...] a trauma. A body blow to the country'.¹⁵ Kay goes on to argue that Britain's decision to leave the European Union is a result of a 'juggernaut of racism' that no one saw coming.¹⁶ To Kay, a sense of home is only achievable through free movement and the act of crossing borders. In 'Fences: A Brexit Diary', published in *The New York Review of Books* (August 2016), Zadie Smith describes the Brexit vote as 'a very ineffective hammer for a thousand crooked nails'.¹⁷ In the article, Smith mainly focuses on the metropolitan, describing London an 'outward looking city [...] so different from these narrow xenophobic places up north'.¹⁸ Yet, Smith contends that the European referendum exposed the unsettling reality that 'fences are being raised everywhere in London', highlighting a profound division within British society that has been developing over the past three decades.¹⁹ This thesis has aimed, in part, to highlight how my selected writers present these deep fractures within the British nations and engage with the under-represented forms of racism and social prejudices that led to the Brexit vote.

¹⁴ 'Theresa May's Conference Speech in Full', *Daily Telegraph*, 05 October 2016
<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/>> [accessed 04 August 2024].

¹⁵ Jackie Kay, 'Poets On Tour: Reeling After the Referendum', *The Guardian*, 02 July 2016
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jul/02/poets-tour-reeling-after-the-referendum>> [accessed 12 January 2024].

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Zadie Smith, 'Fences: A Brexit Diary', *New York Review of Books* (2016), available online: <[https://www-nybooks-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/](https://www.nybooks-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/)> [accessed 20 May 2023].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

British-Sri Lankan novelist A. Sivanandan denounces the referendum, explaining that ‘whatever else Brexit means or does not mean, it certainly means racism [...] that immigration is unravelling the nation [...] thus giving a fillip to popular racism and elevating institutional racism to fully-fledged state racism’.²⁰ Immediately after the Brexit vote results, Ali Smith published *Autumn* (2016), one of the first novels published after the referendum to address Brexit and the first book in Smith’s Seasonal Quartet. *Autumn*, which is set in a post-Brexit world, opens with ‘it was the worst of times, it was the worst of times’,²¹ a reworking of Charles Dickens’s famous opening in *A Tale of Two Cities*, which grounds the novel as capturing and critiquing the political and social turmoil caused by the Brexit vote in the UK.

These strong responses to Brexit show the deep fractures within the UK between those who voted to remain in the EU and those who voted to leave it, and call for an investigation of how far and in what ways ethnic minority writers might contribute to the creation of a sense of Britishness that can transcend such differences. In *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project*, critic Kristian Shaw argues that ‘the charged political events of 2016’ were an expression of ‘Britain’s apparently troubling act of national self-harm’.²² It seems that the Brexit vote recalled (and reinvigorated) a national narrative of British exceptionalism, Euroscepticism, and xenophobia. This narrative has its roots in the legacy of Margaret Thatcher’s fear that Britain would be ‘swamped by people with a different culture’, and Enoch Powell’s infamous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968. I have explained in this thesis that through their writing, Lalwani, Kay, and Guo create connections and critique the stoking of racial prejudice and concerns. By embracing their own and their characters’ cultural and linguistic mixedness, they show that there is no such thing as a ‘real’ Britain.

As discussed previously at the end of each chapter, Kay, Lalwani, and Guo each published a work that engages with the Brexit vote aftermaths. Lalwani’s *You People*, Kay’s *Bantam*, and Guo’s *A Lover’s Discourse* present richly nuanced narratives that grapple with belonging, identity, and the fractures within multicultural Britain. Lalwani’s novel interrogates the moral ambiguities of immigration and the risky life of undocumented

²⁰ Quoted in: Jon Burnett, ‘Racial Violence and the Brexit State’, *Race & Class*, 58.4 (2017), 85–97 (p. 85).

²¹ Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016).

²² Kristian Shaw, *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 169.

individuals, set against a backdrop of increasing hostility toward ‘others’. The restaurant in *You People* is a reflection of post-Brexit Britain—chaotic, diverse, yet haunted by surveillance and suspicion. Kay’s *Bantam*, a poetry collection written during her tenure as Scots Makar, reflects on the UK’s fractured state through personal and political lenses, reclaiming identity with defiance while mourning the erosion of unity and empathy in British discourse. Guo’s *A Lover’s Discourse* explores dislocation where language, migration, loss, and memory become metaphors for the disorientation felt in a post-Brexit society. Her protagonist’s inner monologues echo the alienation and irony of a country cutting its international ties. Collectively, these works interrogate the notion of Britishness and examine the emotional and social toll Brexit imposes on migrants and citizens alike.

These post-Brexit works not only highlight but also actively advocate for a more inclusive and diverse British culture. Through their stories and characters, Black and Asian British writers draw attention to the deep social divisions that have come to the forefront in the wake of Brexit, exposing the fractures within the British nations. María Alonso argues that ‘the migrant subject in general and the European one in particular, understood as a “non-British” subject, becomes the target of political discourse and serves to frame most of British contemporary fiction about Brexit’.²³ These works engage critically with the current political climate, challenging prevailing ideologies and sparking conversations about the direction in which Britain is headed. In doing so, they participate in a broader struggle to redefine and reshape the social and political landscape in the post-Brexit era, showing that the Brexit vote ‘became a convenient catch-all for a range of internal struggles’ that hinder the integrity of the United Kingdom.²⁴ There is still much to be said about the subtle forms of racism that give rise to cultural and social divisions within Britain, especially in literary works written after Brexit.

This calls for an investigation of how Brexit and the associated political changes affected literary publishing after 2016. In her first memoir, *Once Upon a Time in the East: A Story of Growing Up* (2018), Guo reflects on her experiences of dealing with British publishing houses, explaining that ‘here [in the West], it seemed that writing was another

²³ María Alonso, ‘Posthuman Intersections in BrexLit: Representing Migration in Contemporary British Fiction’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2023, 1–17 (p. 2).

²⁴ Kristian Shaw, *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 168.

form of industrial production'.²⁵ Guo highlights publishers' tendency to focus on finding sellable novels that appeal to certain audiences, which reveal a deep fracture within the publishing industry, a gap between what publishers will print and the topics that preoccupy writers. Melanie Ramdarshan Bold concludes her book *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (2019), by remarking that the 'British book publishing industry is characterised by liberal, progressive, whiteness that while not always explicitly racist is often coloured by implicit racism, unconscious biases, and micro-aggressions. Something that other, high profile, authors have publicly discussed'.²⁶ Therefore, further investigation of how the racism and biases have affected Black and Asian women writers, especially in the devolved nation of Britain, is necessary. My brief discussion of various works about Brexit and Brexit literature enriches my reading of the 2000s by underscoring the risks of a narrow critical focus on England and London that has tended to colour perceptions of the period. Comparison between Kay's, Guo's, and Lalwani's writings in the 2000s and their work in the post-Brexit period illuminates the importance of their earlier work, their insightful views of cultural identity, and their continuing interest in imagined futures of belonging to Britain.

Some limitations have arisen in my analysis of Lalwani, Kay, and Guo, especially in terms of the complexity of hyphenated identities. Not all the writers discussed in this thesis are in favour of being described as Black, British, Welsh or Scottish. For instance, Jackie Kay explains that she might accept the term British if it is used as an umbrella term, but she 'certainly will not accept the label "black" if this is connected to fixed ideas of how to behave and what to produce in terms of her art'.²⁷ The question of ethnic identities and identification is a very intricate subject especially when discussing the internal injustices within Britain and its devolved nations. Stuart Hall explains in 'New Ethnicities' that ethnic positioning plays a crucial role in shaping one's identity and sense of self:

We are all [...] *ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not

²⁵ Xiaolu Guo, *Once Upon a Time in the East: A Story of Growing Up* (London: Penguin, 2028), p. 266.

²⁶ Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019), p. 146.

²⁷ Ulrike Zimmermann, 'Out of the Ordinary – and Black? Jackie Kay's Recent Short Fiction', in *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+: New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts*, ed. by Lars Eckstein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 123–38 (p. 124).

an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing, and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity.²⁸

Hall criticises Englishness as an exclusionary approach to ethnicity in Britain. He explains that Englishness represents an ethnicity that has traditionally survived by dominating others through marginalisation, dispossession, displacement, and the erasure of other ethnic identities. He advocates for embracing a diverse view of the British society where multiple ethnicities can coexist. In this thesis, I have illustrated how my selected writers explicitly fight such marginalization and intervene in the construction of Britishness both by asserting their own unique identities and by presenting their protagonists' identity struggles and their anxieties about racial identity and belonging within the devolved nations of Britain. Lalwani, Kay, and Guo demonstrate that identity is far more complicated than one's gift, one's skin colour or one's perfect language and emphasise the richness that comes from diversity.

Given the current political and social disturbances in the United Kingdom, with the rise of the far right and the riots and violence against ethnic minorities that took place across the UK in late July and early August 2024, Upstone's vision of a 'possible future of a transformed social landscape' in which labels such as 'Black' and 'mixed race' do not exist and British society no longer feels the need to use stereotypical categories of race to encompass its diverse population,²⁹ seems too optimistic. Therefore, more attention should be paid to ethnic minority writers and their role in shaping the future of the UK in all of the constituent nations. There are many other writers who published works in the period I investigated in this thesis and deserve additional critical attention, including Leila Aboulela, Trezza Azzopardi, Roopa Farooki, Leonora Brito, Raman Mundair, Helen Oyeyemi, Diana Evans, and Bernardine Evaristo.

Compared to other devolved nations of the United Kingdom, Northern Irish women writers remain 'a neglected group', as the Irish novelist Anne Enright attests.³⁰ Even though

²⁸ Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 442–52 (p. 448).

²⁹ Sara Upstone, *Rethinking Race and Identity in Contemporary British Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 11.

³⁰ In: Rosemary Jenkinson, 'Female Lines: New Writing by Women from Northern Ireland Points to More Good things to Come', *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 November 2017
<<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/books/female-lines-new-writing-by-women-from-northern-ireland-points-to-more-good-things-to-come/36278009.html>> [accessed 05 August 2024].

Northern Ireland, with its rich history and political instability, is not covered within the limits of this thesis, there are many Northern Irish women writers who deserve more critical attention. An example is Irish-Indian poet and playwright Nikita Gill. Much of Gill's work is based on the themes of empowering women, challenging societal norms, and reclaiming one's voice. She often writes about the struggles and strengths of women, drawing on mythological and historical figures to explore these ideas. Gill published five poetry collections between 2017 and 2021 that had a significant impact on modern poetry, particularly in terms of making poetry accessible to a new generation of readers through social media.

This thesis has shown that the strength of fiction and non-fiction written by Black and Asian British women lies in its ability to capture a diverse array of stories and experiences and employ a wide range of narrative strategies to bring these stories to life. The narratives of these writers reveal the intricate and multifaceted nature of British identity, challenging and expanding our understanding of both national and transnational connections. They show that the 'question of home [...] is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate [...] It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of "belonging"'.³¹

This thesis has suggested that there is no singular mode of multiculturalism and has resisted the celebration of the term as a signifier of a unified British identity in the 2000s. Black and Asian British women authors weave different stories of departure and arrival, of finding and losing one's place, and of settling in a new country while dealing with feelings of displacement. Through their storytelling, they challenge the stereotypical notions of belonging that often demand a uniform identity. By doing so, they not only question and disrupt these narrow definitions but also expose deeper truths about the modern human experience in an increasingly globalised world. This body of literature, therefore, is a powerful lens through which the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural interaction can be examined, offering new perspectives on what it means to be part of a community, a nation, and the world at large.

³¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 192.

However, as this study has demonstrated there is still a need for a greater focus on Black and Asian British women authors who actively redefine concepts of Britishness and move away from the focus on London and Englishness that dominated the 2000s. Robert Young noticed that ‘perhaps the fixity of identity for which Englishness developed such a reputation arose because it was in fact continually being contested, and was rather designed to mask its uncertainty, its sense of being estranged from itself’.³² This statement suggests that the articulation of a strong, fixed sense of English identity was, in fact, a way to cope with ongoing challenges and uncertainties about what it actually meant to be English. The identity was not inherently stable but rather was made to appear so in order to deal with underlying insecurities and a sense of estrangement. Black and Asian British women writers challenge and counteract the subtle forms of racism that are often embedded in traditional notions of Britishness, Welshness, Scottishness, and Englishness. These writers promote a more inclusive and diverse understanding of multicultural Britain by recognising and addressing the limitations of conventional ideas, which have historically excluded or marginalised certain groups.

In essence, this thesis contends that the greater inclusion of ethnic minority writers and the depth of view they bring to concepts of Britishness, Welshness, Scottishness, and Englishness would ultimately result in ‘resetting the compass points towards alternative futures’ for the British nations and that the strong presence of these writers would ‘disrupt the very assumptions and understandings of nation itself’.³³ In an essay published late 2023, discussed previously in the thesis introduction, Welsh-Guyanese writer Charlotte Williams argues that ‘Writers of colour are still as yet grossly underrepresented in UK publishing as a whole – I have heard of publishing ratios of 9/1 in favour of the books of white writers.’ These writers are often ‘pigeonholed by their blackness, too often offered as marginalized decorative narratives along the edges of a mainstream that barely shifts to make room.’³⁴ Williams continues to argue that it is only through the recognition of ethnic minority writers with their ‘transnational connections’ that ‘the schism of national identity’ and ‘the creative

³² Young, p. 2.

³³ Charlotte Williams, ‘On Being a Writer in Wales’, 19 November 2023, Available online: <<https://nation.cymru/culture/on-being-a-writer-in-wales-charlotte-williams/>> [accessed 08 January 2024].

³⁴ Ibid.

potential of the margins' can be seized.³⁵ In this spirit, my thesis has aimed to expand the critical view of the 2000s by focusing on less acknowledged writers who not only engage with the devolved nations of Britain but also resist overly optimistic views of multicultural Britain.

³⁵ Ibid.

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