Multiethnic Britain

Statistics about the UK population of the kind given in previous chapters are usually more applicable to some ethnic groups than to others, and this can be for economic as well as cultural reasons (for example, 60 per cent of Bangladeshi and Pakistani Britons are living in poverty, four times the figure for white Britons). So, when discussing language, it is important to realise that while more than half of all sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-old Indians and Pakistanis have English as their main spoken language, this is true of only one-fifth of Bangladeshis in that age bracket. These figures are also contextualised by the fact that nearly half the ethnic minority population is under twenty-four, compared with one-third of the white population. The youth culture of different ethnic groups also varies, such that, for example, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are a third less likely to use drugs than whites. Similarly, 71 per cent of sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds from ethnic minority groups were in full-time education in 2001, compared with 58 per cent of whites. In terms of gender, women from ethnic minorities hold more educational qualifications than white women, and black African women are twice as likely to be qualified above A-level standard. Again, the proportion of Asian women who have separated or divorced is less than half that recorded among whites, while one in ten white women with children is a single mother, compared with half of Caribbean mothers. Last of these indicators, taken from *The Observer*'s 'Britain Uncovered' survey in March 2001, is the fact that three-quarters of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are in partnerships by the age of twenty-five, 50 per cent more than white women.

FIGURE 8.2 Britain's ethnic mix is becoming more and more diverse

The rise of multiethnic Britain has seen great changes in areas such as eating and music. Again food in Britain has been revolutionised by exposure to cuisine from around the world. Every market town now has an Indian and a Chinese take-away, and Thai restaurants are becoming nearly as common. This has not been solely because of migrants coming to Britain but also because travel abroad has given the British a taste for such things as baltis and green curry. Celebrity television chefs, such as Ken Hom (Chinese) and Madhur Jaffrey (Indian), have introduced new foods to the domestic diet. It has been said that this is a positive part of the rapid mongrelisation of British culture, such that Robin Cook, who was then Foreign Secretary, said in early 2001 that Chicken Tikka Masala is now the national dish.

In the arts, 'ethnic' and cross-over music particularly have become mainstream in recent years, with an artist such as Nitin Sawhney nominated for the prestigious annual Mercury Music awards. There are now also the annual MOBO awards solely for black artists, and an equivalent ceremony to celebrate the achievements of British Asians in the arts. Since the 1980s Asian musicians in Britain have been experimenting with rap, dub technology, jungle breakbeats, traditional Indian music and rock. In the mid- to late 1990s Anglo-Asian artists with sitars, guitars, and decks, such as Cornershop, Asian Dub Foundation, Fun-da-mental, and Talvin Singh, broke into the pop charts, to be followed by Taz, a British Asian from Coventry, who is a major star in India and whose 2001 hit 'Laila' includes lyrics sung in English, Swahili, and Spanish. Talvin Singh's Anokha played club nights at The Blue Note in London which attracted media stars, and Cornershop's 1997 album *When I was Born for the Seventh Time* became a critical and commercial success (and included the number one single 'Brimful of Asha'). Though the bands vary in their political engagement, Asian Dub Foundation, for example, released their single 'Free Satpal Ram' in 1998 as a protest against the imprisonment of a Birmingham Asian who defended himself against racist attacks. Across the board, Afro-Caribbeans have exerted a decisive stylistic influence on British youth and mainstream cultures as evidenced by the dance appropriation of aspects of Rudeboy, Rasta, hip hop and sound system culture. Soul II Soul perhaps ideally encapsulate the young, black and British cultural awakening of the mid-1980s with their unique synthesis of a black British attitude, music, fashion, and philosophy. Hip hop culture underlines the creative assemblage that defines Afro-Caribbean youth styles in Britain, whether in music (mixing and sampling), dress (arranging assorted fake and real designer labels), or language.

A festival that epitomises the best multicultural aspects of modern Britain is the Edinburgh Mela. This is Scotland's biggest annual multicultural arts festival, and its aim is to celebrate Scotland's diverse cultures.

The festival's roots are in South Asian cultures, and the Edinburgh Mela was originally created by a group of people from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, yet the festival intends to reflect the wide diversity of what it means to be Scottish, while also bringing artists from around the world, from the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to Papa Wemba, Bappi Lahiri and Musical Youth. It has become the most significant multicultural event in Scotland, attracting people from all parts of the UK.

A major issue of debate that has often focused on issues of ethnicity in the early years of the new century has been asylum seekers. The Labour government has come under repeated attacks for its scheme of distributing migrants from the ports where they arrive to cities around the country. In late 2001, local authorities in north England and Scotland were increasingly reacting against the scheme: city chiefs in Glasgow were said to be holding an emergency meeting to decide where to house the three busloads of asylum seekers who arrived each week, with almost no prior warning and with misinformation about the nationalities involved. Several councils declared that they could take no more refugee families and stopped providing homes for those who arrived, while others accuse the Home Office of paying self-interested private landlords to house thousands of asylum seekers in slums rather than using accommodation provided by the local authorities. After street violence in Bradford, Stoke, and Burnley, the government suspended plans to send more refugees to these cities, but reports of violence against asylum seekers around the country appear weekly in the newspapers. More than a hundred incidents were reported in Hull alone in the year following the introduction of refugees to the city in the summer of 2000. Many local residents believe that asylum seekers are getting a better deal than they are, but in fact most are subject to a voucher scheme where they are given only a little money for telephone calls or bus fares and have to exchange the vouchers for food at designated stores (the government backed out of the voucher scheme late in 2001). It was also said by the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers in 2001 that 1,500 applicants for asylum were detained in prisons, while the Home Secretary decided he would deport thirty thousand in that year. The United Nations estimates that there are 37 million refugees across the world, only 0.5 per cent of whom are in Britain. In 1998 there were fewer than four thousand applications for asylum, but this rose to seventy-six thousand in 2000, the highest proportion coming from Iraq (9 per cent), followed by Sri Lanka (8 per cent), the former Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan (7 per cent each). Of these, 21,565 were granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain by the Home Office (though, by international agreement, asylum seekers are not allowed to seek work).

As a contrast to those voices who see the demise of 'Britishness' in future years, there are those who consider culture, and identity itself, as

pluralistic and multi-layered, while recognising the pressures that are currently questioning the limits of Britain. Perhaps most prominently in these quarters, the 'unsettling' of Britain has been detailed by The Parekh Report on *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* in 2000. The report commissioned by the Runnymede Trust sees seven reasons why the idea of Britain is at a turning-point: globalisation, the country's decline as a world power, its role in Europe, devolution, the end of empire, the spread of social pluralism, and postwar migration. The Report's conclusion is that Britain ought to be recognised as the 'community of communities' it has now come to be and, for that matter, always was. Changes in the understanding of British culture and in the transmission of appropriate national stories, signs, and symbols, can follow through from this appreciation of present and past pluralism. The Parekh Report was commissioned in 1997 at a time when debates over British identity were still recovering from the intervention on the subject of Dr Nick Tate, the Conservative government's Chief Curriculum Adviser in the summer of 1995. Tate called for schoolchildren to be taught what it means to be 'British'.

Clearly, Tate's suggestion that school classes should focus on British identity served as a rallying-cry for certain sections of the press to bewail contemporary ignorance about literature, history, and politics. In *The Times* in July 1995 Janet Daley, the philosopher who has recently retired from the BBC's *Moral Maze* programme, took the opportunity to speak out for a generation of children who were being 'culturally disinherited'. Daley argued that the teaching profession was under the sway of a basic Marxist premise: 'that the passing on of culture [is] a kind of political coercion'. Upbraiding those who wanted to overhaul the teaching of a traditional monologic *English* history, she concluded that for these teachers 'National identity was deemed to be a pernicious myth which only served to exclude anyone who was not party to its smug racial and class attitudes.' But, [she argued], all history is a selective version of events and all cultures are prejudiced in their own favour. 'In the end, [pluralism] is the argument not for many cultures but for none.'

The familiar standpoint here is that muticulturalism results in an attentuation of collective identity: that cultural increase means not addition but dilution. Similarly, Andrew Roberts in the *Daily Mail* at the same time in July 1995 argued: 'The liberal believes a man, once stripped of his national and cultural identity, will become Everyman – citizen of the world. The conservative knows that, in fact, he will become bewildered, schizophrenic, unhappy and lonely.' Mistaking plurality for deracination (the erosion of one's ethnic roots), Roberts was actually protesting against the present variety of British identities, opposed to received images of a national past whose people are easier to homogenise. The reactionary stance underlying much of this rhetoric was clearly a nostalgic one which

considered itself to be embattled in 1995 and has now moved its territory. Having lost most of the moral high ground, the traditionalist position on national identity has shifted to a different level in the more recent present, resulting in an increase in violence among ethnic groups in some parts of Britain, especially inner-city areas with large migrant or multiracial populations. It is clear that some British people consider a multicultural society to be a threat not just to their ideas of national identity but to their very well-being. The suicide plane attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 brought cries of support and outrage from the British press and politicians, but it was also apparent that for some British people these extreme terrorist actions were hard to dissociate from their perceptions of Muslims in the UK, and the weeks following the American disaster were marked not just by calls for a greater understanding of religious and cultural differences but also by verbal attacks and acts of violence aimed at Muslim individuals and families.

Literature has provided a number of prominent contemporary examples of multiethnic Britain, from Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* to the works of Hanif Kureishi. To take one celebrated book, Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* presents a series of metaphors for the heterogeneity of modern Britain. Her title of course plays with the idea that everyone is the same under the skin, but the novel charts the variety of molars, canines, incisors, root canals, false teeth, dental work, and damage that constitute the history behind different smiles. The commonsensical idea of the uniformity of teeth, which can also be divided into a host of shades from pearly to black, is as much a fiction in the novel as the traditional template of Britishness. The prime examplars of traditional Englishness in *White Teeth* are a family called the Chalfens. The Chalfens are taken to be 'more English than the English' because of their liberal middle-class values, and also their tendency towards empiricism. However, they are in fact third-generation Poles, originally Chalfenovskys: not more English than the English, but as English as anyone else. Smith rings this theme of hybridity and cross-fertilisation through numerous extended metaphors, drawn from horticulture, eugenics, and the weather.

The most prominent person in the novel who considers herself to be 'a stranger in a strange land' is Irie Jones, whose mother is 'from Lambeth (via Jamaica)' and whose father is a white war veteran from Brighton. In the novel's metaphor, Irie sees no reflection of herself in the 'mirror of Englishness'. She turns to her grandmother and Jamaica for a sense of her 'roots' but concludes that the idea of belonging is itself a 'lie'. The other central family of the book, the Iqbals, have come to England from Bangladesh. Their second-generation children spend their teenage years apart, the one in London, the other in Chittagong. Each finds his identity is located elsewhere: Millat, living in London, wishes to be an American

gangsta-rapper before he becomes in the words of his father a 'fully paid-up green bow-tie wearing fundamentalist terrorist', while Magid, in Bangladesh, becomes 'a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer'. Their mother, Alsana, expresses the overall view of the novel: 'You go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the right Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy-tale.'

White Teeth's view of race relations, though far from perfect, seems more closely to resemble hopes for Britain's future than observations about its past. The book works politically far more at the level of representation than any kind of confrontation. The novel disseminates a multicultural view of London, where currently over 40 per cent of children are born to at least one black parent. And *White Teeth*, as the novelist Caryl Phillips concluded in his review of the novel, ably dramatises the fact that 'The "mongrel" nation that is Britain is still struggling to find a way to stare into the mirror and accept the ebb and flow of history that has produced this fortuitously diverse condition'. So Smith's horti-multi-cultural view of Britain is best summarised in a passage where she argues that there is, in fact, 'No one more English than the Indian . . . '

New technology

Finally, nothing seems to look to the future more than technology. In the last ten years, a number of machines have materialised in a sizeable number of, if not most, British homes. These include DVD (Digital Versatile Disk) players, which have superseded the video and relegated it to the level of a recorder of television programmes, rather than a device on which to play movies. High-street stores such as Virgin and HMV have given over most of their movie shelf space to DVDs and are selling off films on videotape at bargain prices. Alongside the improved picture quality of DVD, visible on any television, there is the improved sound quality too, which has given birth to the arrival of the Home Cinema System, a set-up of six speakers to convey the aural experience of going to the pictures. As the prices of DVD players has fallen from over £300 to less than £100 in some cases, they have become increasingly de rigueur in middle-class homes, largely because the 'extras' provided on the disks make them worthwhile purchases for people who already have the films on videotape. The music revolution of fifteen years back, when people were persuaded to junk their vinyl collections for CDs, has now happened with film, and is expected to happen again with music in the next few years as Super Audio CDs will supposedly produce better sound quality than CDs, while mini-CDs will store more music, more compactly. Much of this technology, for example WAP