

“Original Traumas”: Narrating Migrant Identity in British Muslim Women’s Writing

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The key phrase in the title of this essay—“original traumas”—is a coinage from Zadie Smith’s novel *White Teeth* which aptly captures one of the key concerns of the novels I discuss: the fact that migrant identities are often suffused with traumatic experiences and the attempt to come to terms with them.¹ Since its publication in 2000, *White Teeth* has been widely acclaimed as an epic tale of multiculturalism, a vision of Britishness for the millennium (see Merrit, Jaggi, Donahue, O’Connell Kakutani). Its exploration of the complex relationships and tightly interwoven connections between a set of London families of Caribbean, Bengali, English and Jewish-British origins appears to celebrate the heterogeneity of contemporary British urban society. Yet, on closer inspection, Smith’s apparently nonchalantly ironic take on the experiences of migration and multiculturalism has a deeply disturbing undertow (see McLeod; Tew, Zadie Smith x-y): the fundamental sense of loss, rootlessness and unbelonging that often comes with living in a glocal space (see Robertson 40). The fact that “[g]locality suggests that our lives are irrevocably enmeshed in a cosmopolitical web of cause and effect” is not presented as a promising opportunity for new forms of community and responsibility (see Schoene 61), but as a profoundly disorientating scenario (see Sassen and Sassen). In this respect *White Teeth* is an epochal novel in a less reassuring sense, and this is why I use the novel as my point of departure. The passage in which the phrase “original traumas” occurs points to what the novel flags up as unavoidably painful constants of the immigrant experience, with the narrator invoking a specific form of the proverbial “compulsion to repeat” (see Freud 75, Meinig 256):

[I]t’s something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you’re still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There’s no proper term for it—*original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. (161; emphasis in the original)

Of course, it is not the actual experience of migration which is repeated, but the traumatic repetition occurs at the level of narration (although, importantly, it has a basis in real, lived experience) as the characters struggle to connect to their origins and to construct their identities in the face of new cultural contexts and expectations. It is this representational level which constitutes the locus of the novel’s exploration of migration and identity.

The designation of the immigrant experience as traumatic ties in with the current proliferation of the trauma discourse in literary and cultural studies (see Kaplan 24-41, Luckhurst 19-76). Obviously, using the notion of trauma to capture migration and its effects, among which are the creation of glocal spaces, suggests a broad and inclusive understanding of trauma, as an experience that is “understood to be elusive and impossible to grasp,” and that “elude[s] sense making and the assignment of meaning [and that hence] cannot be integrated into memory, but neither can ... be forgotten” (Radstone 117). Susannah Radstone’s argument can be traced back to Cathy Caruth’s emphasis on the “unspeakability” and “unrepresentability” of trauma, which constitutes the central aporia at the heart of literary treatments of traumatic experience: (fictional) representations of trauma essentially attempt “to narrate the unnarratable” because traumatic events characteristically overwhelm the individual and resist linguistic representation (Whitehead 4, 3). By implication, trauma is highly significant for identity politics: trauma constitutes a fundamental threat to identity; it “undoes the self by breaking the ongoing narrative, severing the connections among remembered past, lived present, and anticipated future” (Brison 41).²

At the core of Susan Brison’s account of traumatic memory is an understanding of subjectivity as bound up with narration. This alignment of self and “story” is central to contemporary theories of identity. As Paul John Eakin argues, narrative—in the broadest sense of “talking about ourselves” (see 1-59)—is a fundamental, indispensable component of identity formation: “talking about ourselves involves a lot more than self-indulgence; when we do it, we perform a work of self-construction” (2). Conversely, “[w]hen it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely *about* self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self” (2; emphasis in the original). This observation can also be made about human experience more generally, as “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (Bruner, “Narrative” 4). According to Jerome Bruner, this process also works in reverse, that is, our perception comes to mirror the narrative structures commonly used to capture it: “just as our experience of the natural world tends to imitate the categories of familiar science, so our experience of human affairs comes to take the form of the narratives we use in telling about them” (5).

As a consequence, trauma complicates the “life-as-narrative” paradigm (the title of Bruner’s 1987 essay): if it is the nature of traumatic experience to resist narrative rendition, then trauma can be taken to signal the moment at which the attempt to lay claim to identity and render experience meaningful becomes fundamentally problematic. It urges the question whether the widespread belief in narrative as the underlying principle by which identities are constructed and experiences related is ultimately tenable and, conversely, whether responding to trauma must necessarily involve the creation of a coherent narrative.³

It is in tune with current trauma theory that posits that, by invoking the idea of “original trauma,” *White Teeth* conceptualises migration as an experience that constitutes a fundamental shattering of identity and a threat to selfhood (see Schäfer 124, Childs 9). The glocal identities that emerge as a result play out a tension between local realities (the culture and country of origin—often in the form of fantasies, as the actual place is remote—but also the present diasporic community) and the search for global connectedness (the transnational links that bind the characters to families and communities elsewhere, and, more central to the subject matter of this essay, to the Islamic nation that some of the characters seek to establish). This interface is presented as a highly problematic space: the novel abounds with figures almost obsessively preoccupied with their search for roots, and this search is variously presented as a narrative trajectory. Those characters that are implicated in processes of migration (as first or second generation immigrants) struggle to unearth their family histories or consistently define themselves in the orbit of long-established and transmitted family lore. For instance, Irie is engaged on a quest to find out about the history of the Jamaican branch of her family (337-39, 398-402), and Samad is obsessed with the putatively heroic history of his ancestor Mangal Pande (244-61). Conversely, their reception by white British society is conditioned by stereotyped perceptions which essentially subject them to narratives authored by others. This is particularly striking in the case of Millat, the son of Bangladeshi parents, who is riven with a sense of alienation in a society that has not yet come to terms with its postcolonial present and responds to ethnic difference with blunt and discriminatory categorisations:

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country ... (233-34)

This rambling tirade of allusions to populist utterances of low-key racism—mediated, moreover, through the voice of the omniscient narrator—aptly demonstrates that Millat, indeed, has “no voice”: all he can do to express his sense of self is quote populist formulae that ostracise him. Moreover, his sense of uprootedness has destructive implications: he joins a radical Islamic organisation. Admittedly, the group is pictured as a silly project of bored and disillusioned adolescents of less than dogmatic Muslim faith, yet it does imitate fundamentalist ideas⁴ of violently upholding cultural difference, which eventually erupt in actual violence in the novel's powerful denouement. What Millat's development underlines—his group's partly humoristic portrayal notwithstanding—is the desire to counter his sense of alienation with firm belief in the unified “Islamic Nation”:

in other words, with a meaning-giving narrative. Religion, most obviously in its fundamentalist guise, functions as an antidote to the crisis of identity brought about by the traumatic absence of coherent narrative.

Focusing on its different characters' struggles with their "original trauma," *White Teeth* presents a broad canvas of issues against which the argument of this essay evolves: it deals with multiple forms of narrative, its rupture in the face of glocal realities, its usurpation by an alien culture, and the attempt to reconstitute it with the help of (fundamentalist) belief. Similar processes are at work in the two recent novels written by and about British Muslim women that my essay chiefly examines, which urge us to consider to what extent narrative resolution to traumatic experience is feasible.

White Teeth has striking parallels with Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). The novels can be taken as emblematic of the current cultural and political tendency to problematise facile visions of multiculturalism and to instead draft a more complex account of multicultural reality; they exemplify the parallel trend in British fiction to question exclusively celebratory accounts of multicultural coexistence.⁵ Boasting figures similar to, if portrayed in a more serious and nuanced fashion than, Millat in *White Teeth*, the climax of each novel centres on a love affair between the female protagonist and a younger man whose world view revolves around adherence to Muslim culture and values.⁶ While it is all too easy to read these male characters as variants of the stock figure of the late adolescent, fervent Islamic fundamentalist (see R. Ahmed 285-86), these parallels should not simply be dismissed as feeding into clichéd images of bearded jihadists posing in suicide bombers' video broadcasts. Rather, their portrayal suggests a more complex state of affairs, not least because the novels' female figures are initially attracted by their lovers' firm convictions and thus seem to be complicit in the radicalism that comes with them. At the same time, the women develop markedly different coping strategies in the face of the psychologically and emotionally strenuous experiences of negotiating warring allegiances in a glocal context. I will investigate by what means, and to what effect, the characters—male and female—try to turn their self-divisive experience as migrants and members of ethnic minority communities into a coherent narrative, and to what extent the portrayal of the novels' male figures, as opposed to that of their female characters, points to a gendered dimension in responses to the migrants' "original trauma."

Brick Lane tells the story of Nazneen, a woman from rural Bangladesh, who comes to London's Tower Hamlets to marry Chanu, a middle-aged man who has lived in England for several years and has been selected for her. While Chanu becomes increasingly disillusioned with Britain and is obsessed with his plan to take the family back to Bangladesh, Nazneen gradually develops an independent sense of self. This process is aided by her secret love affair with Karim, the sweatshop middle man who brings the piecework that Nazneen does at home in order to contribute to the family's income. From the start,

Karim is described as a blend of urban rough boy and ardent jihadist who becomes increasingly radicalised in the wake of the 2001 Oldham riots and the growing anti-Muslim sentiment of the post-9/11 period (see N. Ahmed). While he chairs the regular meetings of the Islamist Bengal Tigers, he also adorns himself with the paraphernalia of Western consumer culture. This fusion of Islamic and Western culture does not, however, cast doubt on his professed commitment to the Islamist cause and its anti-Western invective; rather, his use of technology—his mobile is programmed to send “salaat alert” (234), and he goes online to read “Hadith of the day, on an Islamic website” (347)—links in with the observation that mobile technology and the internet are structurally embedded in global jihadist strategies (see Roy 270-72).⁷ Karim’s nonchalant reliance on such tools to fashion his identity as a Muslim and advance his cause is one of the reasons he is attractive to Nazneen: for her, who has not had a chance to see Britain, or even London, beyond the confines of her East End flat, his assumed man-of-the-world behaviour has an inevitable appeal. Yet Nazneen’s admiration for him highlights the ambiguity that attaches to Karim. After all, his role in her development is clearly ironic: it is a young man with fundamentalist leanings, paradoxically, who stimulates Nazneen’s intellectual growth, an adolescent spreading traditionalist messages of feminine purity and community coherence who introduces her to physical pleasure and genuine intimacy. What Nazneen fails to see, but what the narrative consistently suggests is that, for all his seeming maturity and self-assured demeanour, Karim is essentially an insecure teenager at heart, who tries to compensate for his disenchantment with his life in an ethnic minority community on a run-down council estate with warmongering rhetoric.

In fact, from the very beginning of their relationship, Nazneen is partly aware of the immature and shallow nature of both Karim’s sexual desires and his political commitments:

He was a man and he spoke as a man. Unlike Chanu, he was not mired in words. He did not talk and talk until he was no longer certain of anything.

Sometimes he became angry and his anger was direct and to the point. “It’s my group. I’m the Chairman.” It was a strong statement, though Nazneen could not help thinking of Shahana and Bibi [her daughters] fighting over their toys. (260-61)

While Nazneen is clearly caught up in her own conventional and clichéd perceptions of masculinity, she also sees Karim’s political activism for what it is: a child’s game grown large. Yet for a long time, she is able to suppress this subconscious awareness in order to elevate Karim to an idealised vision of a fully-fledged individual: “She thought about his certainty, how he walked a straight line while others stumbled. And most of all she thought of what he had that she and Hasina [her sister] and Chanu sought but could not find. A place in the world” (264). Just as Karim’s secure “place in the world” is a form of symbolic investment that is ultimately insubstantial, their entire relationship can be seen as a projection of the desire of each for a sense

of self and an understanding of the world that can be clearly conceptualised and delineated.

After all, Karim, too, cannot conceive of Nazneen in any other way than in terms of his own wishful fantasies and unquestioned ideological commitments, thus creating a real-life version of the pristine cultural origins he fantasises about. She embodies for him the essence of Bangladeshi womanhood (*"You are the real thing"* [385; emphasis in the original]), which, of course, is in itself a cliché. In the end, Nazneen understands that their love is nothing more than an attempt to compensate for their mutual experience of uprootedness and loss. She is the first to see their relationship for what it is:

A picture of him came into her mind. ... Karim ... telling her all the things that lay hidden just outside her window. He knew about the world and his place in the world. That was how she liked to remember him.

It was never so. ... She only saw what she wanted to see. Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it. (448-49)

What Nazneen acknowledges here is the propensity for wishful thinking that both she and Karim have been prone to: their desire to transform their "original trauma" into a meaningful life story entails the danger of shaping reality to fit the demands of narrative coherence, thus imposing coherence where there is none. Karim's strategy for coping with his own sense of unbelonging exposes the potentially destructive consequences that ensue when trauma is papered over for the sake of fake coherence. While his political campaigning might appear to be a relatively innocent form of rebellion, his youthful immaturity veils the outward-directed aggression it entails. The latter becomes poignantly apparent towards the end of the novel, when the activities of his Bengal Tigers trigger a violent riot that throws the entire estate into confusion. Karim might appear to hold a childishly enthusiastic conviction of his political aims, yet the ensuing consequences are no mere child's play. By contrast, Nazneen's development is more complex than the novel's superficial plot level suggests. Similar to Karim, she indulges in fantasies of origins as a counterpoint to the cultural shock of migration. Her epistolary exchange with her sister Hasina, who has remained in Bangladesh, is a case in point: Hasina's fate—her self-destructive rebelliousness and repeated victimisation at the hands of an oppressive patriarchal culture and precarious economy—suggests that the fantasised point of origin is fraught with contradiction and ruptures. Nazneen's sense of dislocation goes beyond the obvious culture clash between Britain and Bangladesh: it is a clash of philosophies, as her belief in the acceptance of fate (inculcated in her by the culture) and gender-specific version of Islam with which she has been brought up are gradually being undercut by the Western, individualist ideal of shaping one's own destiny by making choices. Significantly, this development is framed in explicitly narrative terms. Nazneen's initial belief in fate is, in a sense, the story of her life: as the novel's first chapter recounts, believing her baby daughter to be stillborn, Nazneen's mother refuses medical intervention to save her daughter's life, but is convinced that "we must

not stand in the way of Fate” (14). As the newborn Nazneen survives against the odds, the story of “How You Were Left to Your Fate” (483) develops into an oft-repeated explanatory mantra (its authority indicated by the capitals that give the tale official “story” qualities), told and re-told by her mother and passed on to her own daughters, and it becomes Nazneen’s “lifeline” (426) at times of crisis. Yet as Nazneen becomes more aware of the ambiguities that surround her family’s identity in Britain and her relationship with Karim, she also faces the growing realisation that the familiar certainty of her mother’s story does not hold. The eventual revelation that her mother committed suicide (rather than dying in an unfortunate accident, as family lore has it) exposes that she did not comply with her own ideal of unquestioning submission to fate, and it triggers Nazneen’s final acknowledgement that her life—any life—requires the making of choices, cruel though these may be. The novel is, in fact, framed by this gradual abandonment of the reassuring story that used to shape Nazneen’s perception of self: in the very first chapter, the narrator proleptically comments that “when, at the age of thirty-four, ... when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed, but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye” (16). This recognition of agency is not, however, straightforwardly reassuring or liberating. After all, as Nazneen becomes aware that fate must not be met with indifference, she also has to assimilate the fact that making choices almost inevitably entails causing pain, an ambiguity which is captured by the image of the infant striking its own eye. Nazneen resorts to strategies of negotiation and compromise that entail inward-directed forms of pain and vulnerability, and both her mental breakdown at the height of her affair with Karim and the increasingly tense relations between her husband and her daughters can be read as the culmination of her auto-aggressive tendencies (as also suggested, for example, by her nightly binges on leftover food). What is more, she is forced to make decisions that cannot but hurt those closest to her: it is Nazneen who is honest about the differences between herself and Karim and who eventually ends the relationship, and she ultimately makes her husband move back to Bangladesh on his own.

As Nazneen and Chanu say goodbye, the narrator comments that they feel “a sadness that ... became a part of their breath, their marrow, to travel with them from now to wherever they went” (478). This is a far cry from the emancipatory ring that Nazneen’s decision to stay in London appears to have at first glance, and it harshly undercuts the novel’s ostensible *Bildungsroman* structure and concomitant sense of closure. What the textual emphasis on lasting emotional damage and physically tangible pain (“breath,” “marrow”) means, in effect, is that, in spite of her desire to balance the conflicting needs of her husband, her daughters and her lover, Nazneen is unable to break out of the cycle of uprootedness, pain and ongoing search for roots that determines their lives: in fact, she unwittingly perpetuates it. What Nazneen’s story—or rather, her abandonment of what used to be the

“story” of her life—suggests is that there is no straightforward narrative resolution to traumatic experience. In fact, the very essence of trauma is its refusal of narrative integration; pain and guilt have to be acknowledged and lived with rather than be wholly overcome.

Similarly to *Brick Lane*, Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* is set against a backdrop of blurred cultural allegiances and post-9/11 Islamophobia. It differs from *Brick Lane*, however, in the way in which Islam features prominently in the female protagonist’s sense of self. *Minaret* does not involve a stereotypically “Western” emancipatory tale, conflicted though one of these might be, as does *Brick Lane*. The novel opens on a note of resignation, with the protagonist, Najwa, the daughter of a wealthy Sudanese government official whose family has been forced to emigrate to Britain in the aftermath of a military coup, declaring: “I’ve come down in the world. I’ve slid into a place where the ceiling is low and there isn’t much room to move. Most of the time I’m used to it. Most of the time I’m good” (1). Marta Cariello takes this passage—the novel’s opening sentences—to signal a “traumatic interruption of time” (340), thus explicitly reading the protagonist’s migrant experience along the lines of self-loss as a result of “physical and spatial dislocation” (340). On an immediate level, Najwa is referring to her reduced circumstances and newly low social status (she now works as a maid/nanny in the London household of a young Arab wife with a small daughter). More importantly, she has also suffered a thoroughgoing loss of identity. For Najwa, her enforced dispersal of self and consequent denial of origins (“How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?” [71]) have led her into indecision and stasis, and make her unable to take a stand: “I become fragmented and deflated in discussions; I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking or with the one I like best” (79). By contrast, she perceives those around her—white Londoners—as “unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused” (174).

As the story develops, Najwa is increasingly distinguishable from *Brick Lane*’s Nazneen in that, while the latter comes to distance herself from the fatalism taught by her culture and seeks to determine the course of her own life, Najwa’s is a journey back toward reliance on faith and the belief that the power of divine will supersedes any human intervention. Commenting on her preference for Arabic TV channels, she remarks that

[t]he religious programmes make me feel solid as if they are telling me, “Don’t worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying and all of this, all of this will be meaningful and worth it in the end.” ... This kind of learning makes sense to me. (98)

Obviously, Najwa’s new-found faith enables her to cope with the painful extent to which her life has been uprooted and her sense of self jeopardised. At least superficially, her process of self-definition seems to be complete: “I guess being a Muslim is my identity. ... I just think of myself as a Muslim” (110).⁸ Becoming a devout Muslim is her

answer to the shattering of what she considered to be the constants of her life: family, social status, national identity. She now lacks the stability that comes with a sense of belonging and wishes for “[a] country that [is] a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams. A country we could leave at any time, return to at any time and it would be there for us, solid, waiting” (165). Hence Najwa’s embrace of Islam is also an act of self-protection, a way of avoiding the dispersal of self that comes with the trauma of migration. In a similar way, wearing the hijab protects her, not primarily from the male gaze, but from the diffusion of her identity (“Without it, *my nature* is exposed” [186; emphasis added]). In a sense, though, Najwa’s reliance on her faith can also be read as a carapace: in terms of narrative self-fashioning, faith provides a coherent storyline that provides meaning where there otherwise appears to be none.

What are, in my view, the shortcomings of Najwa’s strategy soon become apparent: beyond her faith, she also seeks comfort on a more immediate, human level—something that is not catered for by spiritual devotion. A tentative attraction develops between herself and Tamer, the nineteen-year-old brother of her employer. While Tamer enjoys a good reputation in the Muslim community for being “committed to the Islamic movement” (106), he is also portrayed as an average teenager. Najwa is aware of these contrasting facets of his personality from the start; in fact, she purposefully contributes to the creation of his outward image as a staunchly committed Muslim, rather than a laddish adolescent (talking to a friend, she muses: “I can tell her about the way he leaves his bed unmade, the pyjamas he steps out of and leaves as a heap on the ground. But these are secrets” [106]). In fact, it is his adolescent fervour that attracts Najwa to him: “He flickers between soulful depth and immaturity. This flickering is attractive; it absorbs my attention” (197).

In his relationship with Najwa—whose sober sense of duty and propriety mean that physical contact does not progress beyond a kiss—Tamer’s behaviour suggests that his firm religious convictions and his emotional immaturity are two sides of the same coin, both indicative of his adolescent tendency to resort to extremes. When his sister sacks Najwa after seeing her and Tamer kiss, his response is a knee-jerk proposal of marriage. He indulges in romantic fantasies that smack of regression and an inability to face up to the realities of life, and his tirade is a cross between a tantrum and nostalgic yearning to escape the here-and-now: “I don’t want to think of the future—all the stupid studying I have to do. I don’t even want to do my re-sits. ... The two of us would go back in time. A time of horses and tents; swords and raids” (255). Tellingly, Tamer’s escapist fantasy is couched in narrative terms, as his vision (“horses and tents; swords and raids”) alludes to fairy tales or legends of knightly adventure, possibly harking back to a glorious Islamic past. Significantly, Najwa sees his reaction for what it is: a way of bolstering his self-image as a fighter for Allah’s cause, and of getting his own back at his family and their academic aspirations for him: “This rebellion is half-formed, half-baked; it lacks a focus and a goal” (220). While she has been

remarkably perceptive about Tamer's immature impulsiveness, it is only at this point that she acknowledges that she, too, has been deluding herself, and she realises that "[h]e is like someone else, a common rebellious teenager" (254). As in *Brick Lane*, this is a case of lovers having, to some extent, made each other up, projecting onto each other qualities which they perceive themselves as lacking. As does Karim for Nazneen, Tamer has allowed Najwa to get in touch with a part of herself that is not represented in the way she usually shows herself to the outside world, as sober, demure and submissive. At the end of the novel, she resignedly observes: "He is all grown up now. And that quality I had adored, that glow and scent of Paradise, is gone. Soon he will be like the rest of us" (256). Najwa has romanticised Tamer just as much as he has idealised her. What is more, they fell in love with each other for their own sakes—to complement the self-image each is seeking to construct and to overcome the dispersal of self each has suffered.

Najwa's refusal of marriage can thus be understood as a more far-reaching rejection of narrative resolution. She acknowledges instead the painful consequences of her decision: "I sit, twisted by cruelty. An hour passes but time means nothing. I can still hear his voice, smell him. I can still see the confusion in his eyes, the way he looked at me as if I were a criminal" (268). Again, Najwa's strategy of coping with her feelings of guilt and loss seem to come full circle, as she emphasises her stoical endurance, made possible by her reliance on her faith: "Not well today. Not well today means that tomorrow I will be better. It is a realistic prediction, a reassuring one. I just have to wait" (273). In spite of her ostensive acceptance, her attitude is tinged with a resignation and stasis that make it unconvincing as a workable coping strategy.

More positively, however, it can also be read as an expression of the pragmatic realism that Najwa repeatedly propagates ("you have to be realistic about certain things" [268])—and this is where it diverges from submission to whatever fate holds in store. Her acceptance of pain is not tantamount to narrative resolution; rather, it entails the recognition that life cannot be contained by simple and reassuring fictions. Najwa distinguishes herself from Tamer in that she willingly embraces compromise, even if only in the sense of accepting the inevitable. Still, her stance at the end of the novel is decidedly ambiguous—after all, she draws the strength she needs for her decision from her faith (a faith that appears stronger than ever, as Najwa plans to go on Hajj [272, 274] now that she has lost her lover and her employment); in other words, she takes recourse in a meaning-giving narrative in order to embed her existence.

The novel's ending reveals the inherent shortcomings of this strategy. It is an attempt to somehow live with the "original trauma" that she has suffered and is unable to escape. Significantly, Najwa's comments on her emotional state towards the end of the novel draw on a set of images that alludes to the Freudian designation of trauma as "compulsion to repeat": "I circle back, I regress; the past doesn't let go. It might as well be a malfunction, a scene repeating itself, a

scratched vinyl record, a stutter” (216). This signals a failure of narrative in the sense of the linear coherence as entailed by Najwa and Tamer’s romantic fantasies. It suggests that, rather than being overcome, trauma can only ever be kept in check, not relegated to a past that can be neatly fenced off.

As my readings have shown, both *Brick Lane* and *Minaret* portray female protagonists who counter their traumatic experience of rootlessness in glocal space by developing strategies of compromise and resorting to a poignantly level-headed pragmatism that honestly acknowledges pain, hurt and guilt. And both novels juxtapose these with male figures who subscribe to simplistic world-views which, in the case of *Brick Lane*, result in violence. Both thereby question the idea of glocality as a “world-transforming” force (Schoene 86), suggesting that there is no simple fusion of local spaces and global embeddedness. Moreover, the novels question the very possibility of a narrative reconstruction of the traumatised self and suggest that the quest for coherent subjectivity is a flawed one. They shed critical light on the assumption that the undermining of self that trauma entails can be overcome through a reconstructive narrative act, that “[p]iecing together a self requires a working through, or remastering of, the traumatic memory that involves going from being the medium or object of someone else’s (the torturer’s) speech to being the subject of one’s own” (Brison 48). As I have argued, the two novels complicate or even contradict this view: the characters are fundamentally unable to “[transform] traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world” (Brison 39). Their failure to do so, however, is played out in gender-distinctive ways that are entangled in a complex manner.

The male figures’ extreme responses and uncompromising stances mean that they turn the emotional violence they have suffered into outward-directed aggression and counter their diffusion of identity with unrelenting fanaticism. In a sense, the violence exercised by Karim (and *White Teeth*’s Millat) signals an extreme manifestation of broader attempts to forcefully impose narrative coherence on their life stories. With their excessive yet unfounded convictions, the male protagonists trigger the developments of their female counterparts, if in an indirect sense. Both women are initially attracted by the seductive appeal of a clear-cut world-view, but it is their initial complicity that eventually enables them to see the need for negotiation. Where compromise is impossible, they become aware of the unavoidability of making choices, with all the complex and potentially hurtful implications this might entail. In one sense, the radical answers provided by the male figures I have discussed are countered with a “feminine” strategy of compromise, negotiation and pragmatism, one that is neither facile nor straightforward, but is painful, defies closure, and, most prominently in Najwa’s case, threatens to revert back to the reassuring parameters of an explanatory narrative. What the novels suggest, then, is a truth that is brutal in its simplicity: trauma refuses integration into a coherent narrative: in fact, the attempt to create such

a narrative is destructive in itself. Far from creating alluring hybrid identities, the “original trauma” at the core of the glocal reality repeats itself in a fundamental sense, creating pain and suffering—new variants of trauma—as it is being worked through.

Notes

1. Of course, not every migrant experience is traumatic; the degree to which it is has to do with the variables of (in)voluntariness, economic (in)security, linguistic or cultural (in)competence and the like. As Simon Gikandi argues, we have to distinguish between the cosmopolitan élites or “postcolonial flaneur[s]” (28) who emulate “the ideals and institutions of western Europe and the United States” (24) and the masses of refugees “from the impoverished and marginalized sectors of the global south” whose migrant journeys are of a “fraught and painful nature” (24). The novels I study in this essay all privilege the latter perspective.

2. I am aware that Brison’s analysis refers to trauma in the sense of intense physical rupture (rape, torture and the like). Still, it is legitimate to apply her argument to trauma in a broader sense, including the traumas of migration and postcolonialism, because the “challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge” (Luckhurst 79) issued by traumatic events of diverse kinds has been widely noted in a variety of contexts (see also Kaplan 24 for the broad range of experiences that “trauma” covers).

3. In this sense my reading diverges from the critical position that regards narrative—or storytelling—as a way of successfully coping with traumatic experience, as it is brought forward, for instance, by E. Ann Kaplan: “telling stories about trauma, even though the story can never actually repeat or represent what happened, may partly achieve a certain ‘working through’ for the victim” (37).

4. I am aware that “fundamentalism” is a highly loaded term, especially in the context of Islam. In this essay I use “fundamentalism/fundamentalist” to denote rigid adherence to religious norms; in those instances where I refer to “fundamentalist Islam/Islamic fundamentalism,” I understand these terms in the sense of what Olivier Roy has called “neofundamentalism”: “a closed, scripturalist and conservative view of Islam that rejects the national and statist dimension in favour of the *ummah*, the universal community of all Muslims, based on *sharia* (Islamic law)” (1). By contrast, “Islamism/Islamist” is used to refer, more broadly, to any form of political Islam.

5. In this sense, the texts contribute to the critical revaluation of the multicultural ideal that has gained ground in the first decade of the new millennium, in particular after the 9/11 attacks. The optimistic vision of multicultural Britain propagated in the Blair years (epitomised by

then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook's "Chicken Tikka Masala" speech [Cook]) has largely given way to a more hesitant and ambivalent perception of the multicultural reality (Fortier), which has also come to be reflected in literary production (see Tew, *Contemporary British Novel* 158-89).

6. The male characters can be seen as embodying different variants of Muslim youth culture, which has developed among Muslim populations in the West and which is as much to do with the experience of "social exclusion" as it is with Islam as such (Roy 143-45). According to Roy, "[t]here is definitely a link between the growing deterritorialisation of Islam (namely the growing number of Muslims living in Western non-Muslim countries) and the spread of specific forms of religiosity, from radical neofundamentalism to a renewal of spirituality or an insistence on Islam as a system of values and ethics" (5).

7. Islamism's reliance on modern technology—which, on the surface, could be seen as a compromising collusion with Western culture—is part of a larger merging which complicates any neat distinction between "Islam" and "the West": "Muslim activists in the West call upon modern cultural or legal concepts, such as minority group rights and anti-racism, in order to be recognised as a minority. Islamic revival is often recast in terms of multiculturalism, authenticity and identity, discourses that are an obvious product of the West" (Roy 33).

8. This self-perception is in line with Amin Malak's observation that "many Muslims regard religion as a key component of their identity that could rival, if not supersede, their class, race, gender, or ethnic affiliation" (3). See also Roy (18).

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