

Multicultural Britain



Material:

Rudyard Kipling, "White Man's Burden", stanza 1, 2, 3, 5, 1899 (poem)

Robin Cook, "Chicken Tikka Masala Speech", 19 April, 2001 (speech)

Nigel Farage, "Speech at the UKIP convention", 20 September, 2013 (speech)

Sarah Gavron, "Brick Lane" (2007) (film)

Hanif Kureishi, "My Son the Fanatic" (1997) (short story)

Garton Ash, "What young British Muslims say can be shocking", The Guardian, 10 August 2006 (article)

Farrukh Dhondy, "Salt on a Snake's Tail", 1978 (short story)

The White Man's Burden



By Rudyard Kipling, 1899

Rudyard Kipling (1865 - 1936) British author and poet. Kipling was born in Bombay, British India (now Mumbai) and has travelled in almost all parts of the world. He is best known for his works of fiction 'The Jungle Book' and a collection of stories which includes 'Rikki-Tikki-Tavi'. In 1907, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He is still an author who can inspire passionate disagreement and his place in literary and cultural history is far from settled: Was he a horrible racist imperialist or do you have to understand his stories in their right historical context?



1 Take up the White Man's burden

Send forth the best ye breed

Go bind your sons to exile

To serve your captives' need;

5 To wait in heavy harness,

On fluttered folk and wild

Your new-caught, sullen peoples,

Half-devil and half-child.

10 Take up the White Man's burden

In patience to abide,

To veil the threat of terror

And check the show of pride;

By open speech and simple,

15 An hundred times made plain,

To seek another's profit,

And work another's gain.

Take up the White Man's burden

20 The savage wars of peace

Fill full the mouth of Famine

And bid the sickness cease;

And when your goal is nearest

The end for others sought,

25 Watch Sloth and heathen Folly

Bring all your hopes to nought.

[...]

30 Take up the White Man's burden

And reap his old reward:

The blame of those ye better,

The hate of those ye guard

The cry of hosts ye humour

(Ah, slowly!) toward the light:

'Why brought ye us from bondage,

Our loved Egyptian night?'

[...]

Comprehension and analysis

1. Pair work: Paraphrase each stanza (express in a shorter way what someone has said or written)
2. How is the black man described?
3. What must the white man do?
4. What is the White Man's Burden?

burden *sb* byrde

forth *adv* ud, frem

ye = you

breed *vb* avle

bind *vb* forpligte

exile *sb* eksil, landflygtighed

captive *sb* fange, tilfangetagen

wait on *vb* opvarte, tjene

harness *sb* seletøj

fluttered *adj* nervøs, urolig

sullen *adj* modvillig

people *sb* folkeslag

a'bide *vb* vente

veil *vb* skærme, dække over

check *vb* holde tilbage

an hundred = a hundred

make plain *id* gøre klart

work = work for

gain *sb* udbytte

savage *adj* vild, primitive

famine *sb* sult

bid *vb* byde, befale

cease *vb* ophøre

sloth *sb* dovenskab

heathen *adj* hedensk, ukristen

folly *sb* tåbelighed

nought *sb* ingenting

reap *vb* høste

better *vb* forbedre

humour *vb* lokke med smiger

bondage *sb* trældom, slaveri

5 **E'gyptian night** *sb* ref. til Biblen: tre dages mørke som i Egypten; meget mørkt nat

Chicken Tikka Masala Speech

(Extract from a speech by the foreign secretary to the Social Market Foundation in London).

By ROBIN COOK

foreign secretary
udenrigsminister
Social Market Foundation
er en tænketank
dannet i 1989

The son of a schoolteacher, Robin Cook was born in Scotland in 1946. He became a Member of Parliament in 1974 and quickly rose to become a prominent figure in the Labour Party. In 1997, when Labour, headed by Tony Blair, won the general election, he became the British Foreign Secretary. He announced that he would add "an ethical dimension" to foreign policy. However, his term as Foreign Secretary was marked by British interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, and allegations that a British company had supplied arms in contravention of a United Nations embargo, somewhat corroded his "ethical dimension". After the 2001 general election he was moved from the Foreign Office to be Leader of the House of Commons.

On March 17, 2003 Robin Cook resigned from the Cabinet and his post as Leader of the House of Commons as a protest against the British participation in the US invasion of Iraq. In a statement he said, "I can't accept collective responsibility for the decision to commit Britain now to military action in Iraq without international agreement or domestic support." Cook is a brilliant parliamentary debater and he has remained president of several political bodies, including the Foreign Policy Centre and the Party of European Socialists. (You can read Cook's much praised resignation speech on the Internet. Find the link at www.systeme.dk/migrant).

Thursday April 19, 2001

Tonight I want to celebrate Britishness. As Foreign Secretary I see every day the importance of our relations with foreign countries to the strength of our economy, to the security of our nation, to the safety of our people against organised crime, even to the health of our environment. A globalised world demands more foreign contacts than even Britain has experienced in the past.

I also know that we are likely to make our way more successfully in the world if we are secure in our British identity, and confident about its future. That security and confidence is important for the in-

5

ner strength it gives us in our conduct of business with others. I want to argue the case why we can be confident about the strength and the future of British identity.

Sadly, it has become fashionable for some to argue that British identity is under siege, perhaps even in a state of terminal decline. The threat is said to come in three forms.

First, the arrival of immigrants who, allegedly, do not share our cultural values and who fail to support the England cricket team. Few dare to state this case explicitly, but it is the unmistakable subliminal message.

Second, our continued membership of the European Union, which is said to be absorbing member states into "a country called Europe".

Third, the devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which is seen as a step to the break-up of the UK.

This evening, I want to set out the reasons for being optimistic about the future of Britain and Britishness. Indeed, I want to go further and argue that in each of the areas where the pessimists identify a threat, we should instead see developments that will strengthen and renew British identity.

2o Multicultural Britain

The first element in the debate about the future of Britishness is the changing ethnic composition of the British people themselves. The British are not a race, but a gathering of countless different races and communities, the vast majority of which were not indigenous to these islands.

In the pre-industrial era, when transport and communications were often easier by sea than by land, Britain was unusually open to external influence; first through foreign invasion, then, after Britain achieved naval supremacy, through commerce and imperial expansion. It is not their purity that makes the British unique, but the sheer pluralism of their ancestry.

London was first established as the capital of a Celtic Britain by Romans from Italy. They were in turn driven out by Saxons and Angles from Germany. The great cathedrals of this land were built mostly by Norman Bishops, but the religion practised in them was secured by the succession of a Dutch Prince. Outside our Parliament, Richard the

35

conduct varetagelse,
udførelse
under siege under
belejring
state tilstand
terminal uoprettelig
decline forfald
allegedly angiveligt,
hævdes det
absorb absorbere
state tilkendegive,
fremføre

explicit utvetydig,
med rene ord
unmistakable umis-
kendelig
subliminal underbe-
vidst, underforstået
devolution overdra-
gelse, decentralise-
ring
gathering samling,
sammenrend
indigenous indfødt
pre-industrial før
den industrielle
revolution
external udefrakom-
mende
naval maritim, flåde-
supremacy herre-
dømme, overmagt
imperial expansion
"imperialisme"
pluralism mangfol-
dighed
ancestry forfædre
succession trontfølge

pluralism mangfol-
dighed
ancestry forfædre
succession trontfølge

Lionheart proudly sits astride his steed. A symbol of British courage and defiance. Yet he spoke French much of his life and depended on the Jewish community of England to put up the ransom that freed him from prison.

The idea that Britain was a "pure" Anglo-Saxon society before the arrival of communities from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa is fantasy. But if this view of British identity is false to our past, it is false to our future too. The global era has produced population movements of a breadth and richness without parallel in history.

Today's London is a perfect hub of the globe. It is home to over 30 ethnic communities of at least 10,000 residents each. In this city tonight, over 300 languages will be spoken by families over their evening meal at home.

This pluralism is not a burden we must reluctantly accept. It is an immense asset that contributes to the cultural and economic vitality of our nation.

Legitimate immigration is the necessary and unavoidable result of economic success, which generates a demand for labour faster than can be met by the birth-rate of a modern developed country. Every country needs firm but fair immigration laws. There is no more evil business than trafficking in human beings and nothing corrodes social cohesion worse than a furtive underground of illegal migrants beyond legal protection against exploitation. But we must also create an open and inclusive society that welcomes incomers for their contribution to our growth and prosperity. Our measures to attract specialists in information technology is a good example.

Our cultural diversity is one of the reasons why Britain continues to be the preferred location for multinational companies setting up in Europe. The national airline of a major European country has recently relocated its booking operation to London precisely because of the linguistic variety of the staff whom it can recruit here.

And it isn't just our economy that has been enriched by the arrival of new communities. Our lifestyles and cultural horizons have also been broadened in the process. This point is perhaps more readily understood by young Britons, who are more open to new influences and more likely to have been educated in a multi-ethnic environment. But it reaches into every aspect of our national life.

astride overskrævs
steed ganger
defiance udfordring,
trods

ransom løsesum
breadth (her) omfang
hub midtpunkt, navle
reluctant modvillig,
tøvende

asset aktiv
vitality vitalitet,
sundhed

legitimate legitim,
lovlig

generate skabe
labour (her) arbejds-
kraft

trafficking smugling
corrode tære, ned-
bryde

cohesion sammen-
hæng

furtive skjult, lysky
exploitation udnyt-
telse

inclusive rummelig,
åben

prosperity fremgang,
velstand

diversity mangfol-
digthed

linguistic sproglig

Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Massala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy.

Coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our economy and society will have significant implications for our understanding of Britishness.

The modern notion of national identity cannot be based on race and ethnicity, but must be based on shared ideals and aspirations. Some of the most successful countries in the modern world, such as the United States and Canada, are immigrant societies. Their experience shows how cultural diversity, allied to a shared concept of equal citizenship, can be a source of enormous strength. We should draw inspiration from their experience [...].

Conclusion

In our thousand years of history, the homogeneity of British identity that some people assume to be the norm was confined to a relatively brief period. It lasted from the Victorian era of imperial expansion to the aftermath of the Second World War and depended on the unifying force of those two extraordinary experiences. The diversity of modern Britain expressed through [...] multiculturalism is more consistent with the historical experience of our islands.

Far from making Britishness redundant, it makes the need for a shared framework of values and institutions all the more relevant. To act as a unifying force, that framework must be one that reflects the realities of contemporary Britain.

It is natural for every nation to be proud of its identity. We should be proud to be British. But we should be proud of the real Britain of the modern age.

Proud that the strength of the British character reflects the influences of the many different communities who have made their home here over the centuries. Proud that openness, mutual respect and generosity of spirit are essential British values.

We should be proud that those British values have made Britain a successful multi-ethnic society. We should welcome that pluralism as

adapt tilpasse
gravy sovs
coming to terms
with accept af
notion ide, forståelse
af

ethnicity etnisk til-
hørsforhold

aspiration forhåb-
ning, stræben

concept begreb
homogeneity ensar-
tethed

assume antage
confine to begrænse
til

aftermath efterspil,
"årene efter"

unify forene
consistent with i
overensstemmelse
med

redundant overflødig
framework struktur,
ramme

reflect afspejle
mutual gensidig

generosity generosi-
tet, storsind

cuisine (fransk) køk-
ken

a unique asset for Britain in a modern world where our prosperity, our security and our influence depend on the health of our relations with other peoples around the globe.

Tolerance is important, but it is not enough. We should celebrate the enormous contribution of the many communities in Britain to strengthening our economy, to supporting our public services, and to enriching our culture and cuisine. And we should recognise that its diversity is part of the reason why Britain is a great place to live.

(2001)

Questions and Activities

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES BOX

- Society of inclusion, hospitality, impurity, heterogeneity, diversity, pluralism, multiculturalism
- Society of exclusion, inhospitality, purity, homogeneity, racism, bigotry, prejudice, intolerance, fear of the foreign, xenophobia
- Foreigners, immigrants, refugees, foreign influence, waves of immigration
- Come to terms with, accept, tolerate, embrace
- Reject, deny, forbid
- National unity, social cohesion, unifying ideas/ structures/ framework
- Rewriting history, reinventing national identity
- Political speech, rhetoric, imagery, connotation, mood, tone

Make your own "Key Words and Phrases Box" with central terms from your class work

Pre-reading Activity

1. Use the Internet or the library to find out who the peoples below were. Then draw a timeline of when they arrived in Britain:

The Celts, the Romans, the Jews, the Angles, the Saxons, the Normans.

Find out, too, who King William of Orange ("the Dutch Prince") and Richard the Lionheart were.

2. When was the Victorian Age? What characterised British nationalism in the Victorian Age?

Analysis

1. Why does the globalised world demand more foreign contacts than ever?
2. What does it mean to be "secure in our British identity" (p. 38, l. 8)? How may this increase the chances of British success in the world?
3. In what ways has Britain been *unusually open to external influence* throughout history?
4. Explain the negative ideas of immigration. What does it mean that Britain is said to be *under siege* and *in a state of terminal decline* (p. 39, ll. 4-5)? What ideas of British national history, culture, identity is Robin Cook speaking against?
5. In what ways is *immigration* a necessity for a modern developed country, according to Cook?
6. In what ways is cultural pluralism and diversity *an economic asset*?
7. In what ways does immigration affect British culture positively?
8. Are there any indications that Robin Cook is more open towards a certain kind of immigrants? If so, who and why?
9. What connotations do the words "purity" and "ethnicity" have in Cook's speech? Explain how these connotations are different from the traditional connotations of the words. Why does Cook want to change their usual connotations?
10. In what ways is Chicken Tikka Masala a perfect illustration of how British national identity becomes multicultural? How is it a symbol of impurity?
11. Look at p. 41, ll. 17-21. What does it mean that the *homogeneity of British identity* depended on the *unifying force* of imperial expansion and the Second World War?
12. In Cook's view, what must replace race and ethnicity as markers of British identity? What should be the unifying force of Britain if the country does not have *one* race and *one* culture?
13. According to Cook, why is tolerance not enough as a response to new ethnic groups in Britain? What more is required and why (p. 42, ll. 4-8)?

Analysis of Robin Cook's Rhetoric

- Go through the text, examining rhetorical features typical of political speeches.
 - Examine the tone of the text. Is the tone optimistic or pessimistic? Illustrate with examples.
 - Examine whether Robin Cook speaks in a formal or informal style through his choice of words. What does that do to the tone or mood the speech creates?
 - Examine the speech for simple categories of *good* and *bad*.
 - Examine the speech for divisions of *reality* and *truth* versus *nonsense* and *fantasy*.
 - List the words and phrases that Cook attaches to multiculturalism. List the words and phrases he attaches to views against multiculturalism.
 - List all the things that are *intensified* (with positive metaphors and comparisons, catchy phrases, short sentences, repetitions).
 - List all the things that are *downplayed* (with negative metaphors and comparisons, omissions and by being granted less space).
- From your analysis above, to what extent does Cook *invite* discussion and *reject* discussion respectively?
- How does Cook's tone serve to reinforce his own views and make the views of his opponents sound unappealing or invalid?
- To what extent does the speech appeal to *emotions* and the *intellect* respectively?
- Discuss to what extent you find the speech persuasive, manipulating and informative.
- Who is Cook addressing his speech to? Define his target group and explain how it shows in the text. You might want to look up The Social Market Foundation on the Internet.

Summarising the Text

- Sum up all the fears and negative attitudes Cook identifies. Sum up all his arguments against fear and negativity.
- In what ways should the British be proud of being British today? Compare this with Victorian national pride (pre-reading question 2). In what ways do you sense in the text that Victorian nationalism is still present in Britain today?

- Do you agree with Cook that multiculturalism can provide the *inner strength* of *national unity*? Why, why not? How may alternatives to multiculturalism be better suited to provide *inner strength* and *national unity*?
- Do you think Cook's argument that British national identity is truly multicultural is convincing? If yes, give examples. If not, why?
- Do you agree that "openness, mutual respect and generosity of spirit" are "essential British values"? – Give your reasons.
- Does Robin Cook speak for a world of no borders and global mobility? Discuss whether there is a contradiction in Robin Cook's message, desiring the world in one place yet keeping a *national* identity?
- Do you think that the mixing of foods is satisfying as an image of cultural mixing? Why or why not?

Discussion

- Are the views of Cook's opponents just a matter of *pessimism* and *threats*? Is it fair only to represent the sceptics and opponents of multiculturalism in this simple light? Can you think of any less optimistic arguments about immigration and multiculturalism which you are also concerned about?
- To what extent is the history of your country a history of foreign influences? To what extent is your national history and identity one of purity, downplaying foreign influence?
- To what extent are immigrants and multiculturalism a part of the international image of your country? Consider whether the international image of your country is a strong or a weak image in the competition for global success.
- Discuss how foreign foods have changed your national culture and identity.

Written Work

- Write a speech about the assets of immigration in your culture and national identity. You may copy Cook's rhetoric and food imagery. Read the best speeches aloud in class.

Nigel Farage's speech at the UKIP conference

The Spectator 20 September 2013 12:59



Image: Getty

Well, here we are. After twenty years. What an audience. Look at you. All that work. All those leaflets. Up at dawn. I know well those streets you have trodden. But you have done magnificently. And how it's paid off.

We are changing the face of British politics.

5 (...)

Certainly by the time of the general election we'll be the third highest-membership party in Britain.

Every other party is fighting their decline.

We're delighted, they're appalled; the commentators are amazed.

10 In eight months' time there are the European elections and the Council elections.

UKIP will be standing in both sets, fielding thousands of candidates.

I'm taking nothing for granted but I think we're going to do well in the European elections. My ambition, my conviction is that we can come first and cause an earthquake.

(...)

5 On the doorstep we tell voters that UKIP councillors aren't constrained by Labour or Conservative affiliations. They are un-whipped. Free to represent the interests of the community. To fight for the right for local people to have referendums on key local issues such as fracking and the building of wind farms.

And what support we find out there. What eclectic support. Look at you!

20 You did it. We did it. Everyone in this hall.

(...)

When we launched our party just 17 per cent of British people agreed we should withdraw from the European Union.

Today, that figure is 67 per cent.

3 The British Social Attitudes Survey shows how much Britain has been moving UKIP's way.
On many different areas of our national life.
On welfare – that benefits should be there for need, not as a lifestyle choice.
On education – that grammar schools are a great engine of social mobility.
And yes, on the European Union.

30 Yes, on immigration.
It's the biggest single issue facing this country. It affects the economy. The NHS. Schools.
Public services. The deficit.
But the establishment has been closing down the immigration debate for 20 years.
UKIP has opened it up. We need to. From the 1st of January next year the stakes are rising

35 dramatically.
Let's have that debate! Openly. We need to talk about it!
We are a nation that has always been open minded about immigration. But more people came
to this country in one year, 2010 than came in the thousand years before it.
I'm not against immigration. Far from it. Migrants have qualities we all admire. Looking for a

40 better life. They want to get on. I like that. We admire that.
So I'm speaking here as much as for the settled ethnic minorities as for those who have been
here forever.
Half a million new arrivals a year!
It's just not sustainable.

45 Anyone who looks at it honestly knows it's not sustainable.
(...)
So who are we? Who is the typical UKIP voter? I'll tell you something about the typical UKIP
voter – the typical UKIP voter doesn't exist.
When I look at the audiences in those theatres there is a range of British society from all parts

50 of the spectrum. Workers, employers, self-employed. Big businessmen, corner shop owners.
Well off, comfortably off, struggling. Young as well as old. Not ideologues. Some left, some
right, mostly in the middle. Some activists, some haven't voted for twenty years.
One thing many have in common: they are fed up to the back teeth with the cardboard cut-out
careerists in Westminster.

55 (...)
And that's why UKIP attracts this eclectic support.
Because when we believe something – we don't go "are you thinking what we're thinking". We
say it out loud.
That's why UKIP is the most independent-minded body of men and women who have ever

60 come together in the name of British politics.
Which presents occasional difficulties.
We have some people with overactive Facebook accounts. And we have some who make public
pronouncements that I would not always choose myself.

(...)

65 UKIP is a free-thinking, egalitarian party opposed to racism, sectarianism and extremism. UKIP is dedicated to liberty, opportunity, equality under the law and the aspirations of the British people.

We will always act in the interests of Britain. Especially on immigration, employment, energy supply and fisheries.

70 We know that only by leaving the union can we regain control of our borders, our parliament, democracy and our ability to trade freely with the fastest-growing economies in the world.

And £55 million a day, incidentally, we get that back as well.

A referendum to allow the country to decide this matter will create the greatest opportunity for national renewal in our lifetime.

75 That's us.

(...)

All the parties now talk tough on immigration.

David Cameron said he would bring it down to the tens of thousands.

There are still half a million people a year coming in.

80 Do you know, I really think they haven't made the connection.

I was in an immigration debate chaired by Nick Robinson. I started to talk about Europe, the rights of entry and residence that EU citizens have. He stopped me. No, he said, this debate is about immigration it's not about Europe.

That's how deep the disconnect goes.

85 Ten thousand a week. Half a million a year. Five million economic migrants in ten years coming to this country.

Unprecedented. Never happened before.

The effects are obvious. In every part of our national life.

The strain these numbers are putting on public services.

90 Schools. The shortage of school places in primaries and secondary schools.

The NHS. The sheer weight of numbers that adds to the other problems of that Housing. Demand pushes up prices.

Wages are driven down by the massive over-supply of unskilled labour.

And from the 1st of January next year, the risks increase massively.

95 The seven year period is up and nearly 30 million of the good people of Bulgaria and Romania have open access to our country, our welfare system our jobs market.

How many will take advantage of that no one knows.

The Home Office don't have any idea at all. The previous estimate was 13,000 in total.

Migration Watch thinks 50,000 a year. It could be many times that.

100 No one knows. It's no way to run a policy.

And you can't blame people wanting to come here.

I don't blame them.

I'd come here myself if I was in their position.
 So would you. Anyone would be tempted.

105 In Bulgaria and Romania, average earnings are a fifth of ours.
 The purchasing power of £20 of child benefit a week is five times over there what it is here.
 So consider a family of mum, dad and three children. They're going to think, let's send Dad
 over to get work in Britain. That enterprising and industrious fellow can come here, find a job,
 and be eligible for child benefit for his three children – even though they aren't living here.

110 £60 a week – with the purchasing power of five times that. Sent back to Romania or Bulgaria.
 What an incentive. What a draw. What a pull factor, as they call it in immigration circles.
 And while you can't blame them – is it fair? Is it fair for the people who are already here in
 this country. Who've paid in to the system?
 That migrants can come and immediately start drawing benefits?

115 When we, the host country, is strapped for cash, when youth unemployment is at a million,
 when the NHS is groaning and the deficit is a burden on every family?
 I know it isn't fair. I know it isn't right. And I know there isn't a thing the Government can do
 about it.
 (...)

120 They are tied up in the cat's cradle of EU laws, regulations, directives and treaties.
 The only way this can be dealt with is by leaving the EU.
 Not prolong the agony. But leave, and leave soon. That's what UKIP has been arguing for
 twenty years and what an increasing majority of the British people are – with very good
 reason – coming to believe as well.

125 Sixty seven per cent. Research suggests that 67 per cent of Britons now support leaving the
 Union.
 I'm not sure how carefully everyone has thought this through, so let me say a little about what
 life outside the Union looks like to me.
 I believe that leaving the Union and reclaiming our destiny will create the most exciting

130 opportunity for national renewal in our lifetime.
 At the most basic level we get back £55 million a day. It adds up. It's £20 billion a year. We
 could reduce the deficit. We could reduce corporation tax to 10 per cent. Give us the most
 competitive and attractive business taxes in the western world.
 We get our money back.

135 We get our borders back.
 We get our Parliament back.
 We get our fisheries back.
 We get our own seat in on the bodies that actually run the world.
 We get back the ability to strike free trade deals. We can abolish tariffs on African produce

140 and do more to raise living standards there than any amount of aid.
 There are those who say we can't go it alone. That our global influence will decline because we

are small.

Those are the true voices of Little England. We speak for Great Britain.

(...)

145 Leaving the Union will give us our country back and open a door to the world.

We are changing the face of British politics and all our arguments are gaining traction. In rhetoric the other parties are attempting to move in to our territory but without the slightest intention of delivering.

(...)

150 Let's make May 22nd as our referendum on EU membership, let us send an earthquake through Westminster. Let us stand up and say: Give us our country back!

<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2013/09/nigel-farages-speech-full-text-and-audio/>

My Son the Fanatic

by Hanif Kureishi

Hanif Kureishi. Born in Bromley in 1954 he grew up experiencing first hand the racial and cultural clashes that he addresses in most of his work. The product of an interracial marriage between a Pakistani immigrant and an English woman, the inspiration for his work has been drawn from his own life. He studied philosophy at the University of London. He has published novels, short stories, plays and filmscripts. *My Son the Fanatic* was published in *Love in a Blue Time* (1997).

Surreptitiously the father began going into his son's bedroom. He would sit there for hours, rousing himself only to seek clues. What bewildered him was that Ali was getting tidier. Instead of the usual tangle of clothes, books, cricket bats, video games, the room was becoming neat and ordered; spaces began appearing where before there had been only mess.

Initially Parvez had been pleased: his son was outgrowing his teenage attitudes. But one day, beside the dustbin, Parvez found a torn bag which contained not only old toys, but computer discs, video tapes, new books and fashionable clothes the boy had bought just a few months before. Also without explanation, Ali had parted from the English girlfriend who used to come often to the house. His old friends had stopped ringing.

For reasons he didn't himself understand, Parvez wasn't able to bring up the subject of Ali's unusual behaviour. He was aware that he had become slightly afraid of his son, who, alongside his silences, was developing a sharp tongue. One remark Parvez did make, 'You don't play your guitar any more,' elicited the mysterious but conclusive reply, 'There are more important things to be done.'

Yet Parvez felt his son's eccentricity as an injustice. He had always been aware of the pitfalls which other men's sons had fallen into in England. And so, for Ali, he had worked long hours and spent a lot of money paying for his education as an accountant. He had bought him good suits, all the books he required and a computer. And now the boy was throwing his possessions out!

The TV, video and sound system followed the guitar. Soon the room was practically bare. Even the unhappy walls bore marks where Ali's pictures had been removed.

surreptitiously i hem-
melighed
rouse ruske op i
clue spor, fingerpeg
bewilder forvirre
tangle virvar
mess rod
initially i begyndelsen
torn revet
elicit fremkalde
conclusive algerende
eccentricity særhed
pitfall faldgrube
accountant revisor
suit sæt tøj
require kræve

Parvez couldn't sleep; he went more to the whisky bottle, even when he was at work. He realised it was imperative to discuss the matter with someone sympathetic.

Parvez had been a taxi driver for twenty years. Half that time he'd worked for the same firm. Like him, most of the other drivers were Punjabis. They preferred to work at night, the roads were clearer and the money better. They slept during the day, avoiding their wives. Together they led almost a boy's life in the cabbies' office, playing cards and practical jokes, exchanging lewd stories, eating together and discussing politics and their problems.

But Parvez had been unable to bring this subject up with his friends. He was too ashamed. And he was afraid, too, that they would blame him for the wrong turning his boy had taken, just as he had blamed other fathers whose sons had taken to running around with bad girls, truanting from school and joining gangs.

For years Parvez had boasted to the other men about how Ali excelled at cricket, swimming and football, and how attentive a scholar he was, getting straight 'A's in most subjects. Was it asking too much for Ali to get a good job now, marry the right girl and start a family? Once this happened, Parvez would be happy. His dreams of doing well in England would have come true. Where had he gone wrong?

But one night, sitting in the taxi office on busted chairs with his two closest friends watching a Sylvester Stallone film, he broke his silence.

'I can't understand it!' he burst out. 'Everything is going from his room. And I can't talk to him any more. We were not father and son - we were brothers! Where has he gone? Why is he torturing me!'

And Parvez put his head in his hands.

Even as he poured out his account the men shook their heads and gave one another knowing glances. From their grave looks Parvez realised they understood the situation.

'Tell me what is happening!' he demanded.

The reply was almost triumphant. They had guessed something was going wrong. Now it was clear. Ali was taking drugs and selling his possessions to pay for them. That was why his bedroom was emptying.

'What must I do then?'

Parvez's friends instructed him to watch Ali scrupulously and then be severe with him, before the boy went mad, overdosed or murdered someone.

imperative bydende
nødvendigt
sympathetic medfølelse
Punjabi her: pakistaner
cabby taxachauffør
lewd sjofel
truant pjække
excel udmærke sig
attentive påpasselig
straight A's topkarakterer
busted ødelagt, vakkelvorn
pour out udgyde
scrupulously yderst omhyggeligt
severe streng

brass luder
liaison forbindelse, kunde
ferry transportere
dilated udvidet
liable to tilbøjelig til
vigil overvågning
probe undersøge
syringe sprøjte
rock her: klump, kage
flinch krympe sig
alert (år)vågen
sullen modvillig, mut

Parvez staggered out into the early morning air, terrified they were right. His boy – the drug addict killer!

To his relief he found Bettina sitting in his car.

Usually the last customers of the night were local 'brasses' or prostitutes. The taxi drivers knew them well, often driving them to liaisons. At the end of the girls' shifts, the men would ferry them home, though sometimes the women would join them for a drinking session in the office. Occasionally the drivers would go with the girls. 'A ride in exchange for a ride,' it was called.

Bettina had known Parvez for three years. She lived outside the town and on the long drive home, where she sat not in the passenger seat but beside him, Parvez had talked to her about his life and hopes, just as she talked about hers. They saw each other most nights.

He could talk to her about things he'd never be able to discuss with his own wife. Bettina, in turn, always reported on her night's activities. He liked to know where she was and with whom. Once he had rescued her from a violent client, and since then they had come to care for one another.

Though Bettina had never met the boy, she heard about Ali continually. That late night, when he told Bettina that he suspected Ali was on drugs, she judged neither the boy nor his father, but became businesslike and told him what to watch for.

'It's all in the eyes,' she said. They might be bloodshot; the pupils might be dilated; he might look tired. He could be liable to sweats, or sudden mood changes. 'Okay?'

Parvez began his vigil gratefully. Now he knew what the problem might be, he felt better. And surely, he figured, things couldn't have gone too far? With Bettina's help he would soon sort it out.

He watched each mouthful the boy took. He sat beside him at every opportunity and looked into his eyes. When he could he took the boy's hand, checking his temperature. If the boy wasn't at home Parvez was active, looking under the carpet, in his drawers, behind the empty wardrobe, sniffing, inspecting, probing. He knew what to look for: Bettina had drawn pictures of capsules, syringes, pills, powders, rocks.

Every night she waited to hear news of what he'd witnessed.

After a few days of constant observation, Parvez was able to report that although the boy had given up sports, he seemed healthy, with clear eyes. He didn't, as his father expected, flinch guiltily from his gaze. In fact the boy's mood was alert and steady in this sense: as well as being sullen, he was very watchful. He returned his father's long looks with more than a hint of criticism, of reproach

reluctantly mod-
stræbende
abandon forlade
donate forære
charity velgørenheds-
Lahore by i Pakistan
Moulvi religiøs lærer
indignity nedværdigelse
Mullah islamisk lærer
rove flække, vandre over
devotions her: andagts-
øvelser
yearn længes brændende

even, so much so that Parvez began to feel that it was he who was in the wrong, and not the boy!

'And there's nothing else physically different?' Bettina asked.

'No!' Parvez thought for a moment. 'But he is growing a beard.'

One night, after sitting with Bettina in an all-night coffee shop, Parvez came home particularly late. Reluctantly he and Bettina had abandoned their only explanation, the drug theory, for Parvez had found nothing resembling any drug in Ali's room. Besides, Ali wasn't selling his belongings. He threw them out, gave them away or donated them to charity shops.

Standing in the hall, Parvez heard his boy's alarm clock go off. Parvez hurried into his bedroom where his wife was still awake, sewing in bed. He ordered her to sit down and keep quiet, though she had neither stood up nor said a word. From this post, and with her watching him curiously, he observed his son through the crack in the door.

The boy went into the bathroom to wash. When he returned to his room Parvez sprang across the hall and set his ear at Ali's door. A muttering sound came from within. Parvez was puzzled but relieved.

Once this clue had been established, Parvez watched him at other times. The boy was praying. Without fail, when he was at home, he prayed five times a day.

Parvez had grown up in Lahore where all the boys had been taught the Koran. To stop him falling asleep when he studied, the Moulvi had attached a piece of string to the ceiling and tied it to Parvez's hair, so that if his head fell forward, he would instantly awake. After this indignity Parvez had avoided all religions. Not that the other taxi drivers had more respect. In fact they made jokes about the local mullahs walking around with their caps and beards, thinking they could tell people how to live, while their eyes roved over the boys and girls in their care.

Parvez described to Bettina what he had discovered. He informed the men in the taxi office. The friends, who had been so curious before, now became oddly silent. They could hardly condemn the boy for his devotions.

Parvez decided to take a night off and go out with the boy. They could talk things over. He wanted to hear how things were going at college; he wanted to tell him stories about their family in Pakistan. More than anything he yearned to understand how Ali had discovered the 'spiritual dimension', as Bettina described it.

To Parvez's surprise, the boy refused to accompany him. He

claimed he had an appointment. Parvez had to insist that no appointment could be more important than that of a son with his father.

The next day, Parvez went immediately to the street where Bettina stood in the rain, wearing high heels, a short skirt and a long mac on top, which she would open hopefully at passing cars.

'Get in, get in!' he said.

They drove out across the moors and parked at the spot where on better days, with a view unimpeded for many miles by nothing but wild deer and horses, they'd lie back, with their eyes half closed, saying 'This is the life.' This time Parvez was trembling. Bettina put her arms around him.

'What's happened?'

'I've just had the worst experience of my life.'

As Bettina rubbed his head Parvez told her that the previous evening he and Ali had gone to a restaurant. As they studied the menu, the waiter, whom Parvez knew, brought him his usual whisky and water. Parvez had been so nervous he had even prepared a question. He was going to ask Ali if he was worried about his imminent exams. But first, wanting to relax, he loosened his tie, crunched a popadom and took a long drink.

Before Parvez could speak, Ali made a face.

'Don't you know it's wrong to drink alcohol?' he said.

'He spoke to me very harshly,' Parvez told Bettina. 'I was about to castigate the boy for being insolent, but managed to control myself.'

He had explained patiently to Ali that for years he had worked more than ten hours a day, that he had few enjoyments or hobbies and never went on holiday. Surely it wasn't a crime to have a drink when he wanted one?

'But it is forbidden,' the boy said.

Parvez shrugged, 'I know.'

'And so is gambling, isn't it?'

'Yes. But surely we are only human?'

Each time Parvez took a drink, the boy winced, or made a fastidious face as an accompaniment. This made Parvez drink more quickly. The waiter, wanting to please his friend, brought another glass of whisky. Parvez knew he was getting drunk, but he couldn't stop himself. Ali had a horrible look on his face, full of disgust and censure. It was as if he hated his father.

Halfway through the meal Parvez suddenly lost his temper and threw a plate on the floor. He had felt like ripping the cloth from the table, but the waiters and other customers were staring at him.

Yet he wouldn't stand for his own son telling him the difference between right and wrong. He knew he wasn't a bad man. He had a conscience. There were a few things of which he was ashamed, but on the whole he had lived a decent life.

'When have I had time to be wicked?' he asked Ali.

In a low monotonous voice the boy explained that Parvez had not, in fact, lived a good life. He had broken countless rules of the Koran.

'For instance?' Parvez demanded.

Ali hadn't needed time to think. As if he had been waiting for this moment, he asked his father if he didn't relish pork pies? 'Well.'

Parvez couldn't deny that he loved crispy bacon smothered with mushrooms and mustard and sandwiched between slices of fried bread. In fact he ate this for breakfast every morning.

Ali then reminded Parvez that he had ordered his own wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her, 'You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in!'

Parvez was so annoyed and perplexed by this attack that he called for more drink.

'The problem is this,' the boy said. He leaned across the table. For the first time that night his eyes were alive. 'You are too implicated in Western civilisation.'

Parvez burped; he thought he was going to choke. 'Implicated!' he said. 'But we live here!'

'The Western materialists hate us,' Ali said. 'Papa, how can you love something which hates you?'

'What is the answer then?' Parvez said miserably. 'According to you.'

Ali addressed his father fluently, as if Parvez were a rowdy crowd that had to be quelled and convinced. The Law of Islam would rule the world; the skin of the infidel would burn off again and again; the Jews and Christians would be routed. The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes.

As Ali talked, Parvez looked out of the window as if to check that they were still in London.

'My people have taken enough. If the persecution doesn't stop there will be *jihad*. I, and millions of others, will gladly give our lives for the cause.'

'But why, why?' Parvez said.

'For us the reward will be in paradise.'

'Paradise!'

urge bede indrængende
mend his ways forbedre
sin levemåde
usher lede væk, få ud fra
et sted
straight klart
haul hive
dislodge fjerne
accountancy revisor-
uddannelse
obvious indlysende
usury åger
corruption fordærv

Finally, as Parvez's eyes filled with tears, the boy urged him to mend his ways.

'How is that possible?' Parvez asked.

'Pray,' Ali said. 'Pray beside me.'

Parvez called for the bill and ushered his boy out of the restaurant as soon as he was able. He couldn't take any more. Ali sounded as if he'd swallowed someone else's voice.

On the way home the boy sat in the back of the taxi, as if he were a customer.

'What has made you like this?' Parvez asked him, afraid that somehow he was to blame for all this. 'Is there a particular event which has influenced you?'

'Living in this country.'

'But I love England,' Parvez said, watching his boy in the mirror. 'They let you do almost anything here.'

'That is the problem,' he replied.

For the first time in years Parvez couldn't see straight. He knocked the side of the car against a lorry, ripping off the wing mirror. They were lucky not to have been stopped by the police: Parvez would have lost his licence and therefore his job.

Getting out of the car back at the house, Parvez stumbled and fell in the road, scraping his hands and ripping his trousers. He managed to haul himself up. The boy didn't even offer him his hand.

Parvez told Bettina he was now willing to pray, if that was what the boy wanted, if that would dislodge the pitiless look from his eyes.

'But what I object to,' he said, 'is being told by my own son that I am going to hell!'

What finished Parvez off was that the boy had said he was giving up accountancy. When Parvez had asked why, Ali had said sarcastically that it was obvious.

'Western education cultivates an anti-religious attitude.'

And, according to Ali, in the world of accountants it was usual to meet women, drink alcohol and practise usury.

'But it's well-paid work,' Parvez argued. 'For years you've been preparing!'

Ali said he was going to begin to work in prisons, with poor Muslims who were struggling to maintain their purity in the face of corruption. Finally, at the end of the evening, as Ali was going to bed, he had asked his father why he didn't have a beard, or at least a moustache.

'I feel as if I've lost my son,' Parvez told Bettina. 'I can't bear

to be looked at as if I'm a criminal. I've decided what to do.'

'What is it?'

'I'm going to tell him to pick up his prayer mat and get out of my house. It will be the hardest thing I've ever done, but tonight I'm going to do it.'

'But you mustn't give up on him,' said Bettina. 'Many young people fall into cults and superstitious groups. It doesn't mean they'll always feel the same way.'

She said Parvez had to stick by his boy, giving him support, until he came through.

Parvez was persuaded that she was right, even though he didn't feel like giving his son more love when he had hardly been thanked for all he had already given.

Nevertheless, Parvez tried to endure his son's looks and reproaches. He attempted to make conversation about his beliefs. But if Parvez ventured any criticism, Ali always had a brusque reply. On one occasion Ali accused Parvez of 'grovelling' to the whites; in contrast, he explained, he was not 'inferior'; there was more to the world than the West, though the West always thought it was best.

'How is it you know that?' Parvez said, 'seeing as you've never left England?'

Ali replied with a look of contempt.

One night, having ensured there was no alcohol on his breath, Parvez sat down at the kitchen table with Ali. He hoped Ali would compliment him on the beard he was growing but Ali didn't appear to notice.

The previous day Parvez had been telling Bettina that he thought people in the West sometimes felt inwardly empty and that people needed a philosophy to live by.

'Yes,' said Bettina. 'That's the answer. You must tell him what your philosophy of life is. Then he will understand that there are other beliefs.'

After some fatiguing consideration, Parvez was ready to begin. The boy watched him as if he expected nothing.

Haltingly Parvez said that people had to treat one another with respect, particularly children their parents. This did seem, for a moment, to affect the boy. Heartened, Parvez continued. In his view this life was all there was and when you died you rotted in the earth. 'Grass and flowers will grow out of me, but something of me will live on -'

'How?'

'In other people. I will continue - in you.' At this the boy ap-

superstitious overtroisk
endure udholde
reproach bebrejdelse
venture vove
grovel krybe
inferior mindreværdig
contempt foragt
inwardly indvendigt
fatiguing udmattende
consideration over-
vejelse
halting stammende
affect berøre
hearten få mod

distressed bekymret, ked af det
for good measure i tilgift, oveni
the bottomless pit svovlpølen
oppressed undertrykt
confidence selvsikkerhed
determined beslutsom
gaudy prangende
conscious bevidst
inadvertently uden at tænke over det

peared a little distressed. 'And your grandchildren,' Parvez added for good measure. 'But while I am here on earth I want to make the best of it. And I want you to, as well!'

'What d'you mean by 'make the best of it'?' asked the boy.

'Well,' said Parvez. 'For a start ... you should enjoy yourself. Yes. Enjoy yourself without hurting others.'

Ali said that enjoyment was a 'bottomless pit'.

'But I don't mean enjoyment like that!' said Parvez. 'I mean the beauty of living!'

'All over the world our people are oppressed,' was the boy's reply.

'I know,' Parvez replied, not entirely sure who 'our people' were, 'but still - life is for living!'

Ali said, 'Real morality has existed for hundreds of years. Around the world millions and millions of people share my beliefs. Are you saying you are right and they are all wrong?'

Ali looked at his father with such aggressive confidence that Parvez could say no more.

One evening Bettina was sitting in Parvez's car, after visiting a client, when they passed a boy on the street.

'That's my son,' Parvez said suddenly. They were on the other side of town, in a poor district, where there were two mosques. Parvez set his face hard.

Bettina turned to watch him. 'Slow down then, slow down!' She

said, 'He's good-looking. Reminds me of you. But with a more determined face. Please, can't we stop?'

'What for?'

'I'd like to talk to him.'

Parvez turned the car round and stopped beside the boy.

'Coming home?' Parvez asked. 'It's quite a way.'

The sullen boy shrugged and got into the back seat. Bettina sat in the front. Parvez became aware of Bettina's short skirt, gaudy rings and ice-blue eyeshadow. He became conscious that the smell of her perfume, which he loved, filled the car. He opened the window.

While Parvez drove as fast as he could, Bettina said gently to Ali, 'Where have you been?'

'The mosque,' he said.

'And how are you getting on at college? Are you working hard?'

'Who are you to ask me these questions?' he said, looking out of the window. Then they hit bad traffic and the car came to a standstill.

By now Bettina had inadvertently laid her hand on Parvez's shoulder. She said, 'Your father, who is a good man, is very wor-

fury raseri

pace gå frem og tilbage
retaliare gøre gengæld

ried about you. You know he loves you more than his own life.'

'You say he loves me,' the boy said.

'Yes!' said Bettina.

'Then why is he letting a woman like you touch him like that?'

5 If Bettina looked at the boy in anger, he looked back at her with twice as much cold fury.

She said, 'What kind of woman am I that deserves to be spoken to like that?'

'You know,' he said. 'Now let me out.'

10 'Never,' Parvez replied.

'Don't worry, I'm getting out,' Bettina said.

'No, don't!' said Parvez. But even as the car moved she opened the door, threw herself out and ran across the road. Parvez shouted after her several times, but she had gone.

15 Parvez took Ali back to the house, saying nothing more to him. Ali went straight to his room. Parvez was unable to read the paper, watch television or even sit down. He kept pouring himself drinks.

20 At last he went upstairs and paced up and down outside Ali's room. When, finally, he opened the door, Ali was praying. The boy didn't even glance his way.

Parvez kicked him over. Then he dragged the boy up by his shirt and hit him. The boy fell back. Parvez hit him again. The boy's face was bloody. Parvez was panting. He knew that the boy was unreachable, but he struck him nonetheless. The boy neither covered himself nor retaliated; there was no fear in his eyes. He only said, through his split lip: 'So who's the fanatic now?'

Translation

Parvez har nu i snart to årtier boet i London, hvor han ernærer sig som taxa-chauffør. Han føler ikke længere den store tilknytning til fædrelandet, Pakistan, og er så småt ved at tillægge sig engelske vaner. Han drikker således gerne et glas eller to med kollegaerne, medens de diskuterer forhold, der normalt ikke ville blive bragt på bane i en muslimsk sammenhæng. Parvez har store forventninger til sin søn, Ali, og har ofret meget for at give ham en god uddannelse.

Pair work

1. Introduce the father and the son (include education, profession, ethnic background etc.)
2. In what ways has Ali changed lately? Give examples.
3. What picture do the discarded belongings give of Ali's previous life?
4. Parvez sees his son's behaviour as eccentric (p. 60) – explain why.
5. How does the change affect Parvez, and why does he not discuss these problems with his son?
6. Describe Parvez' lifestyle and comment on his "boys' life" with his colleagues.
7. What hopes has Parvez had for his son, and what "pitfalls" (p. 60) has he feared?
8. To whom does Parvez turn for advice? Is it useful advice?
9. Describe Parvez' and Bettina's relationship.
10. What was Parvez' own boyhood like, and how has it affected his present outlook?
11. Describe the visit to the restaurant – why was it "the worst experience of his life"? (p. 64)
12. In what ways has Parvez led a life that is not in accordance with the Koran?
13. Describe the situation where Parvez picks up his son and account for his violence towards the end.

Overall questions

1. Comment on the roles of the women in the story.
2. In what ways have the roles of the father and the son been reversed?
3. Account for Ali's position – what factors (social and personal) have contributed to his radicalization?
4. This story is about culture clash. Make a list of respectively Islamic and Western values and norms and explain the clash in terms of these contrasts.
5. Picture analysis: compare Parvez' situation to Hockney's painting on p. 138

Written work

1. Using the last scene between Ali and Parvez as a starting point, give a 1st person account of Ali's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.
2. Write an essay about fatherhood. You are free to draw also on other texts from the collection.

BritBox

- In *My Son the Fanatic* identity problems are put down to race and clash of cultures. Compare with *Baglady*, *The Stack* and *State of England* where different explanations are given (such as class, gender and family).
- The father-son relationship is also in focus in *State of England*, and to a smaller degree in *The Stack*.
- **FluxLex**: psychopolis, battered and bruised...

What young British Muslims say can be shocking - some of it is also true.

French Muslims identify with France more than their British counterparts do with Britain. We need to understand why.



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 - Timothy Garton Ash
 - The Guardian, Thursday 10 August 2006
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For anyone who has hoped and believed, as I have, that the British way of integrating Muslim citizens is more promising than the French one, the last year has been discouraging. Following the shock of the July 7 London bombings, perpetrated by young Muslims born and educated here, we now have the results of two recent opinion polls, an excellent TV documentary by Channel 4's Jon Snow, and the
5 sombre warnings of Britain's most senior Muslim policeman. All convey the same message. Not only do many young British Muslims feel more alienated from the country they live in than their parents did - that's true of Muslims from immigrant families right across Europe - but the sense of not belonging seems to be even more acute in Britain than in France.

In a poll conducted for the Channel 4 documentary, only half the British Muslims questioned said they
10 thought of Britain as "my country", whereas nearly a quarter said they thought of it as "their country" - meaning someone else's. The younger respondents were, the greater the alienation. Shockingly, one in three British Muslims aged between 18 and 24 said they would rather live under Sharia law than under British law. In a Pew poll of Muslims worldwide, a gob-smacking 81% of British Muslims said they
15 thought of themselves as a Muslim first and a citizen of their country only second. This is a higher proportion than in Jordan, Egypt or Turkey, and exceeded only by that in Pakistan (87%). By contrast, only 46% of French Muslims said they were Muslims first, compared with 42% who felt themselves first and foremost citizens

Why is this? Here are a few possible explanations, none of which are mutually exclusive. It may have something to do with the different regions from which French and British Muslims come. I find it
20 suggestive that the only country to top the British score was Pakistan. And to where do most British Muslims trace their origins? Well, nearly half of them have their roots in Pakistan, and another quarter-million or so in India and Bangladesh. A very large number hail from just one region: Kashmir. Is there something about the particular religiosity of Kashmiri, Pakistani and more broadly south Asian Islam,

and the way it develops in interaction with a European host culture, as opposed to the Islam of the
25 Maghreb, from which most French Muslims come?

Then, and most obviously, Blair's Britain has been the most prominent ally of Bush's America in the
Washington-styled GWOT (global war on terror), seen by many young Muslims as a GWOI (global war
on Islam). By contrast, Chirac's France has positioned itself, from Afghanistan to Iraq to Lebanon today,
as an opponent of the GWOT/I and in some measure a friend (or appeaser, to American and British
30 neocons) of Muslims in general and Arabs in particular. There is now overwhelming evidence that
Blair's foreign policy, and especially the role of British troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, has contributed
very significantly to the alienation of British Muslims in general, and younger, better-educated ones in
particular. In the Channel 4 poll, nearly one third of young British Muslims agreed with the suggestion
that "the July bombings were justified because of British support for the war on terror". That's truly
shocking.

This doesn't mean Blair's foreign policy has been all wrong. For example, I believe that the intervention
in Afghanistan was entirely justified, because the al-Qaida terrorist network that demolished the twin
towers was based in that failed state. The tragedy is that, instead of then devoting our resources to
rebuilding Afghanistan, we rushed on to the neocons' war of choice in Iraq, thus creating two bloody
40 failures instead of one possible success. But, whatever you think of the policies in detail, there is no
question that they have angered young British Muslims.

I have always thought that the very undemanding vagueness, the duffle-coat bagginess of Britishness
was an advantage when it comes to making immigrants and their descendants feel at home here. After
all, what have you traditionally required in order to be British? An ability to talk about the weather at
45 inordinate length. Being willing to mind your own business, to live and let live. A general inclination to
obey the law of the land, more or less. Perhaps a mild interest in the royal family, football or cricket.
That's about it. The very idea of talking about ourselves as "citizens" has seemed to the British vaguely
pretentious and foreign, more specifically French - and therefore bad. But perhaps a more demanding
civic-national identity, like that of the French Republic, has its advantages after all, giving a stronger
50 sense of identity and belonging. (Whether we can change this by state-ordered pep talks on Britishness
and citizenship is another question; although I do think more can be done in schools.)

Another possible reason is that Britain now has one of the most libertine societies in Europe.
Particularly among younger Brits in urban areas, which is where most British Muslims live, we drink
more alcohol faster, sleep around more, live less in long-lasting, two-parent families, and worship less,
55 than almost anyone in the world. It's clear from what young British Muslims themselves say that part of
their reaction is against this kind of secular, hedonistic, anomic lifestyle. If women are reduced to sex-
objects, young Muslim women say, I would rather cover up. Theirs is almost a kind of conservative

feminism. Certainly, it's a socially conservative critique of some aspects of British society, particularly visible in their generation, in the urban neighbourhoods where they live.

60 And the critique is nuanced. Half those asked for the Channel 4 programme thought Muslim girls should make up their own minds whether to wear the hijab to school. Nearly a third of female respondents felt there was some truth in the idea that Islam treats women as second-class citizens. (The men just couldn't see it. Now I wonder why ...) And a majority said that British society treats women with respect.

65 Whatever the mix of causes for this alienation, we need to escape from seeing British Muslims only through the prism of two currently prevailing paradigms: the terrorism paradigm and the backwardness paradigm.

The former starts from the question: how can we prevent our Muslims becoming terrorists? A reasonable enough question, but if this becomes the predominant way of looking at British Muslims (Muslim = potential terrorist), it risks contributing to the very effect it aims to avoid. The latter asks: how
70 can we help these people to integrate better into our modern, progressive, liberal, secular society? Its implicit equation is: hijab = backwardness.

The idea that these young British Muslims might actually be putting their fingers on some things that are wrong with our modern, progressive, liberal, secular society; the idea that rational persons might freely choose to live in a different, outwardly more restricted way; these hardly feature in everyday
75 progressive discourse. But they should.

Articulate British Muslims, as encountered on Jon Snow's Channel 4 documentary and in magazines such as Q-News and Emel, are not merely telling us non-Muslim Brits a lot about themselves. They are also telling us something about ourselves.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/aug/10/comment.race>

Questions and tasks

Farrukh Dhondy was born in Western India in 1944. He came to Britain to study English and American literature; later he taught at comprehensive schools in inner London. From 1975 he has been politically active in the East End. Dhondy has published collections of short stories and a novel.

- Describe the relationships between Jolil, Kahlil, and Mr. Miah. What attitudes towards the white society do they represent?
- Why is Jolil fascinated by Bruce Lee and Kung Fu?
On page 108 Jolil sums up the ideals of Kung Fu; what happens to these

ideals when the film is shown at Jolil's school?

- Describe and explain the reactions of Jolil and Mr. Miah throughout the two clashes with the white youths.
- When does Jolil find out what his father was doing in the kitchen at night? – what is the significance of the last four lines?
- Which character in the story possesses the qualities that Jolil found in Kung Fu?
- Explain the title of the story.
- Summarize the information in the text about the conditions of Bengali immigrants (work, housing, education, language, religion, generation gap).

Farrukh Dhondy

Salt on a Snake's Tail

From: *Come to Mecca* and other stories (1978)

There was the short route home from school and the long route. Jolil took the long route because by the time he got out of school the other boys who lived in his building had gone home. Mr Morrisson had kept him behind in his office and shown him some books.

'We must do something about your English,' Mr Morrisson had said. 'Come up to my room at ten to four and we'll go over some things together.'

Jolil didn't want to refuse. He didn't want to tell Mr Morrisson why he was impatient to get home. He usually left the school gate with five or six of the

other Asian boys. It wasn't planned, but it was necessary. If they walked home together, they could pass the gangs of older white boys who gathered outside the school gates without fear. They'd take the short route home, and if they passed the cluster of hostile faces outside the white estate at the end of their street, they could quicken their steps and feel the safe warmth of being part of a crowd. If you walked past there alone, you walked along the Whitechapel Road and came round to the flats the long way.

'I got something out of the public library specially for you, Jolil,' Mr Morrisson

said, and he handed Jolil a book on the martial arts. He had told Mr Morrisson some days before that that was what he was interested in.

'Don't just stare at the pictures, try and read some of it,' Mr Morrisson said.

His father saw him clutching the thick book when he got home. 'Go wash your face and say your prayers,' Mr Miah said. 'We're not going to the mosque till later,' Jolil protested. He headed for the inside room where he and his sisters slept. His father was already wearing his white muslim prayer cap. A bad sign, Jolil thought. It meant that his dad was in a lecturing mood. He would carry on at him.

'Get down to *namaaz*,' he said sternly. 'The devout must pray as many times on Friday as they can. There is no help for us but Allah. Who did you come home with?'

Jolil didn't reply. He sat on his bed and opened the book that Mr Morrisson had given him. Normally when he got home, his father would be working at the machines in the front room, sewing acres of cloth together, fulfilling the 'contract'. But Friday was the sabbath. The machines would stop. The women would be in the kitchen, his mother and sister-in-law. His father would prowling about the front room and give directives which most of them ignored.

Jolil had let Mr Morrisson into the secret. He had told him why he liked Kung Fu and Bruce Lee.

'Read anything, read comics if you must,' Mr Morrisson said. He didn't really catch on, Jolil thought, it was another reading exercise to him. His friend Errol knew about Kung Fu; he'd take him the book when he went over to his place on Saturday.

Jolil turned the pages. Bruce Lee's muscles almost bulged out of the photographs. His hands, fingers outstretched, seemed to be clawing magical strength out of the very air. The red scars on his body were

supposed to be blood wounds, but they looked deliberately cut in neat patterns. And his face, Jolil thought, his face had the authoritative power of a humble man. Jolil tried to read the writing on the opposite page. He could read each word, but the sentences didn't seem to add up. The pictures couldn't actually tell you how

to put the thing into practice, but they told a story all right. Bruce Lee was a simple man, probably a poor man when he started out. He even wore the clothes of an urchin, two sizes too small for a grown man. In one picture, he was in the air, a fierce animal, falling with puma-like fists on four shocked opponents.

Jolil rose from the bed and went to the mantelshelf and looked in the mirror. His mother came into the room and took the brass box of betel nut and cloth in which the betel leaves were wrapped.

'Go and wash your face, your father will be furious,' she said. Jolil narrowed his eyes and undid three buttons on his shirt, staring into the mirror. He touched his cheek-bones. Yes, they were somewhat like Bruce Lee's.

'You bring this book of idols into the house?' his father suddenly asked. Jolil lowered his arms and turned round. His father had picked the book up off the bed and was leafing through it with an expression of severe disapproval. Mr Miah did a dry, coughing gargle in his throat, as though gathering his spit to show his contempt.

'It's from school,' Jolil said.

'Who leads young men astray with all these pictures of half-naked actors?' Jolil's father asked. 'Who is it that teaches young men this sort of disrespect?'

'Give it to me. I'll put it away,' Jolil said, trying to take the book from his father's hands.

'You should be reading the Koran. I shall still be grateful to Allah, even though he's given me an infidel son. You'd better read the books that matter, son, before you take up all these Chinaman's tricks. You don't reply when your father asks you questions anymore, eh?'

'What questions?' Jolil asked, trying to

distract his father's attention while he grabbed the book and looked around for a hiding place for it.

'Who did you come home from school with?'

'Errol.'

'Errol, eh? Well, it's time you stopped running around with the darkies. You should be down in the basement learning to read Arabic with Kazi-sahab.'

'All the babies go to Kazi's class,' Jolil replied.

'You are never too old to humble yourself and learn the words of Allah.'

'Anyway, I know Arabic. I know Urdu ... aleph, be, pe, the, zaal, zin and everything.'

'The only Urdu you know is from those rubbish films. You have no respect, bringing rubbish books into the house, and dirty pictures of actors and Chinamen.'

'He is not an actor,' Jolil said. 'He's a tiger.'

'A common wrestler. Tigers are stupid creatures anyway. They live outside the grace of God; they fall into pits built with twigs and leaves to trap them.'

Jolil knew when his father was about to begin some story about Bangladesh.

He'd heard this one twenty times, about the tiger who thought that every trodden path had been paved by his own paws and was surprised to find a monkey loping along the cleared track to his water-hole.

Jolil didn't want to hear the end of it. He turned and went into the kitchen and asked his sister-in-law when his brother would be home.

'He's gone to the meeting.'

'They always have these useless meetings. They are becoming Godless in this wretched country; they think they can fight white men. You know how many white men there are?' his father asked, walking into the kitchen. The women made no reply.

'I wanted to go to the meeting,' Jolil said.

'They will talk. Bengalis love to talk big talk,' his father said.

There had been an incident in the previous

week. A Bengali had been stabbed in the ear on his way home from work. The white gang that stabbed him had run away. Some people in the flats where Jolil's family lived had called a meeting of all the families. His elder brother, Khalil, had gone and returned with the news that they were planning some defence of their buildings. The night of the stabbing, gangs of Bengali youths had set out from the cafés on Brick Lane, determined to challenge any white gang that offered insult or violence. Then the next day someone had thrown a brick through the window of the ground-floor flat and another meeting had been called, this time of the whole building.

'If they want a war, there's going to be a war,' Khalil said when he returned.

'What can you do if God's will is not with you?'

'Leave God aside,' Khalil replied. 'We're going to store bricks and stones on the terrace, and if a gang turns up to attack, we can all go up there and deal with them.'

'If a snake stings you once, you don't turn round and chase it so it can sting you again. Leave it alone,' Mr Miah said to his eldest son.

'What do you do if it turns round to sting you again?'

'You put salt on its tail,' Mr Miah said. He always said that sort of thing as though it were God's truth. Sometimes Jolil wanted to argue with him. He couldn't make sense of his dad's proverbs.

His dad would say, each grain of rice bears the name of the person who's destined to eat it. Or he'd say, you put salt on a snake's tail and it'll never bother you again. Another day he'd shout at Jolil for spilling grains of salt on the kitchen floor while sprinkling his chips and tell him that when he appeared before God, he would be made to pick up every grain of salt he'd wasted in his lifetime with his eyelids before he'd be allowed past the gates of heaven. It was all nonsense. But Mr Miah used a no-nonsense tone to say it in. They were the truths of life, just like going to the mosque on Fridays,

and working at the machine when your father told you to.

Jolil would only assist with the sewing work when a contract had to be urgently finished. He'd skip school and help his father and sister-in-law who sat all day at the two machines in their front room. When a contract was 'urgent', the machines would spread their clatter into the night. Jolil didn't like machining, but he wouldn't tell his dad. Mr Miah said there were two types of money, sweat money and water money, and with water money you couldn't keep a family alive, you could only gamble it away or buy water with it. You had to sweat if you wanted to eat. Jolil would load the thread on to the machines, he'd wind up reels of nylon and separate sewn pieces from the piles of cut material every hour, he'd fetch the tea and he'd run down to the shop for condensed milk and cigarettes when he was asked to.

'You'll have to miss school on Monday and work at these linings,' his father said.

'Why can't we finish it over the weekend?'

'We don't work on the sabbath,' Mr Miah said, 'and on Sunday we're going to Dog Market to get some chairs. We have to get your mother some chairs.'

'I have to go to school on Monday.'

'What for? Since when have you become so fond of learning?'

'They're going to show a Kung Fu film to all the third years.'

'They waste your time in school,' his father said. 'What use is that to you in becoming a tailor?'

'It's not an ordinary film,' Jolil said. 'It's about the secrets of Kung Fu. Mr Morrisson is bringing a film which will explain everything.'

'Everything can never be explained,' his father said. 'If you carry on in this useless way, I'll send you back to Bangladesh and you can learn to be a begging wrestler, go from village to village and challenge all the idiots to fight.'

'I'll work tomorrow. I can do a hundred linings in a day,' Jolil said.

He'd do it, he thought. When they'd

been at the old house, there was still some joy left in this business, making the needle hum between your fingers. Tailoring made nimble but tired fingers. It turned your fingers into tools. Kung Fu converted them into weapons.

These were thoughts his father wouldn't understand. In a movie called *The Black Dragon Revenges the Death of Bruce Lee*, the hero had plucked out the eyes of several villains and destroyed with similar cruelty the faces of others. There was a knack to it. You twisted your palm in the faces of the enemy. Your hurricane hands had to be trained to lay low an army of fiends. Once he was good enough, Jolil told himself, he'd allow people to photograph him. That's the kind of hero he wanted to be. Once he was good enough he'd get his photograph in the *Marital Arts* magazine, and in *Filmfare*, which his sister-in-law read. He'd be the first Bangladeshi martial arts hero, and his films would sell better than those of Rajesh Khanna, whom his sister-in-law adored, and then he could buy a big white American car. But if he ever became famous, he wouldn't go and live in Malabar Hill in Bombay like the other film stars did. He'd use his powers to do other things, to right a lot of wrongs, to be a saint of the fighting world.

His father had once told Jolil a story about a wise man being reborn in a remote village in Sylhet. He said the souls of old bandits implanted themselves in the bodies of newborn babies and returned as flesh in the families of saintly people. Wisdom passes from man to man, his father said. Strength is God-given and can't be extinguished; it's like a flame which leaves not only embers but heat behind it. And Jolil wondered whether the soul of Bruce Lee would pass into the body of an up-and-coming young hero. It was one of his father's stories that he wanted to believe.

In the past few months, Mr Miah had come up with a lot of these stories. Jolil had noticed that the more trouble there was, the more philosophical his father became. He would put on his prayer-cap and he would mutter at the rest of the

family. Khalil had stopped paying any attention to him.

Khalil said there'd be more trouble. When the summer came the whites would go on the rampage, they'd maybe come with guns. Khalil's mates all said that they wanted to be ready, but Jolil knew that they didn't know how to be ready for them. The first task was to protect their building. There were fifty Bengali families there. They were all squatters. They had moved into the building amid tremendous excitement. Some young Bengalis had moved the first family in, and the news had spread through Brick Lane and its environs. Like the rest, Jolil's family had quit their little back room in their relatives' house and moved their mattresses and utensils to the new place. It wasn't new at all, of course. It was an old building that nobody else wanted. On the first day there had been a lot of coming and going. The police came and white men from the government came in vans and spoke to the two or three young men who were conducting the whole operation. They had settled in and a month later the trouble began. Some of the Bengalis were very fierce. They'd make tough speeches about fighting and about protecting their families and their own people. Jolil's father didn't make any speeches, at least not in public. He argued with Khalil at home.

Khalil would say, 'This is a *jihad*, a holy war. If we want to stay in this country, we have to fight.'

And yet Khalil brushed his hair to look like a film star and put on his best clothes and went out with his friends, strolling up and down Whitechapel Road and Brick Lane and making trips to the West End. Even Khalil didn't understand what it was they had to do. Strolling around Brick Lane wouldn't make you strong, wouldn't build you up and strike terror in the guts of the 'rubbish' whites. Jolil was determined to practise the arts of discipline and meditation, because Mr Morrisson had told him that being an expert at anything was difficult. At the root of all strength was discipline and meditation.

in and out through window sills with their frames ripped out. Their voices, a mixture of Bengali and sharp English exclamations, echoed round the yard. The sound of sewing machines and the odour of frying spices floated out of open doorways.

'You hear them?' Jolil's father said.

'They won't stop their machines for judgement day. They shouldn't call themselves Muslims. See what the promise of a few pence does to our people.'

He gathered his spit and fired it out of his mouth on to the pavement. They walked across the narrow cobbled street, past the boarded-up warehouses towards the mosque. Jolil knew that the kids from the white estate at the end of that street called this territory 'Paki-land'. They'd have to pass through those shabby concrete flats and then they'd be safe again. The new concrete would give way again to the half-gutted complex of old factories and houses, the smell of 'pig-lard' as his father called it in Bengali, would give way again to the richer scents of garlic and coriander from the warren of Asian dwellings which surrounded the territory of the mosque.

Jolil saw them, and saw that his father had spotted them too: a group of about a dozen white boys and girls, leaning against and sitting on the concrete parapets that surrounded their estate. They should have gone the other way round, Jolil thought. He took a couple of hurried steps to walk abreast of his father. His father's steps became shorter and faster. He was staring straight into space, as though he was unaware of the eyes of the crowd that greeted their approach. A small lump came into Jolil's throat. It wasn't too late to turn round and go the other way, even if it meant an extra half-mile to walk. But that was what they mustn't do. His father walked on as though the thought hadn't occurred to him.

As they approached, the gang stopped their chatter. They stood sultry and silent. Jolil looked at their feet as he passed, he didn't want to look up in their faces in case they took that as a provocation. They looked massive, these white youths,

in their close-fitting clothes and their close-cropped hair.

'Allah will guide us,' Jolil's father muttered, as though to himself.

They walked past the gang and a voice called out from behind them, 'Oi, Pak-a-mac.'

'Keep walking,' Jolil's father said to him, pretending to be in charge of their pace which was light with the lift of fear. Jolil could see that his father was afraid. Maybe even this gang of louts could smell the stink of funk that came off him.

'Can't wait now, eh?' one of the boys said. 'Got to rush off and put in some overtime.' He was trying to imitate an Asian accent.

'Leave off, Baz,' one of the girls on the parapet said. 'One of these days these blokes are going to lay a hiding on you.'

'Don't make me laugh,' the boy said. 'The only hiding these geezers know is under their beds when there's trouble.'

Even that won't help them soon, though. Mr Miah's step had broken into a kind of run.

'You'll have to run all the way back to the jungle,' a voice from the mob shouted behind them.

'You see why the Koran forbids us to drink?' asked Jolil's father. Jolil didn't reply.

At the mosque Jolil tried to concentrate on his prayers. His heart was still beating fast. What could they have done, he was thinking. He looked round at the other men who were on their knees, bending their bodies to the intonation of the prayers. Jolil felt a sense of calm. All these people, he thought, all these people. They can't drive us anywhere. Khalil had said that the whites wanted to drive them back by scaring them, making them so afraid to walk the streets that they'd have to pack up and go back to Bangladesh.

He looked up at his father. His panic seemed to have passed away and he looked serenely absorbed in his prayers, opening and closing his eyes. A little threat, a little discomfort, that was what life offered you, he seemed to be thinking. Jolil knew

his father. To him it wasn't important. Maybe it wasn't important to all this crowd on their knees. Like the snow and the early dark in winter, this threat and hatred that had been loosed all round their surrounded lives, was just part of the fact of England. Like the kites in the skies over the villages in Bangladesh, or the locusts that swept the crops, coming like the monsoon in fatal clouds, these 'rubbish whites' as they called them, were creatures with whom one had to share the landscape. For Jolil they were different. For six years he'd been to school with white kids. He knew every twist of the language they spoke. He understood the jokes they made. He knew their reasons and their unreason. To his father they were people to be ignored, their remarks were like the noise of crows in the trees towards sunset; they signified nothing.

After coming out of the mosque, Jolil noticed that his father lingered around until they were joined in the street by other men from their building.

'Never be scared of jackals,' he said to Jolil. 'If those white men had tried to attack us or anything I would have taught them a good lesson.'

'We should go round the other way,' Jolil said.

'Oh no,' his father replied. 'Streets were made to walk on.' And he spat with conviction.

'You should have spat at them when they abused us,' Jolil said.

'My mouth was dry, boy.'

The next afternoon Jolil was at Errol's place. Errol's room was plastered with Kung Fu posters. Jolil told Errol about the book that Mr Morrisson had given him.

'Some high books on Kung Fu, boy, only black belts could understand them. It ain't like football where anyone can see the tricks. Kung Fu is a heavy science, boy; if you don't know the meditation, then you can't do nothing,' Errol said.

'They discussed the film they were going to see. Morrisson had told them that it was called *The Secrets of Kung Fu*. Errol

said maybe the film could teach him a couple of things, there were still one or two things he needed to know.

When Jolil got home his father and sister-in-law were at the machines. His father would normally give up his seat to Jolil and go off to the mosque on his own, leaving Jolil to work for a couple of hours. This day he didn't budge. He turned to his daughter-in-law and said she could have a rest now that Jolil had returned. They worked in silence. His father hadn't told the others at home about the incident the previous evening.

On Sunday Jolil set out with his father to Dog Market. It was crowded. People walked between rows of junk shops on either side. The stalls sold everything from vegetables to antique gramophones. His father poked his head into several second-hand shops and looked around for a set of chairs.

'Wanting chair, good chair,' he said to the man with the huge belly who sat outside one of the shops.

'What sort of chairs?'

'For sitting down.'

'Look in there, mate, I've got plenty of chairs.'

'How much price?'

His father walked to the back of the shop which was piled with mattresses and old tables and canvas sheets and broken furniture. He lifted a well-polished chair off the top of the pile.

'Those are no good to you, mate,' the man said. 'They're antiques.'

'How much?' his father insisted.

'What's the point of telling you if you ain't gonna want them?'

'I want them,' Mr Miah said. Jolil could see that his father understood that this shopkeeper was trying to insult him.

'All right, let's say twelve pound each, all right? Satisfied?'

Mr. Miah put the chair back on top of the pile.

'Come and have a dekho at these, mate, more your sort of thing. Good strong chairs, these, last till your boy has grandchildren running all over Spitalfields.'

'They're two quid each,' the man added, handing the steel-framed, plastic-covered chairs to Mr Miah. He dusted the chairs off.

Mr Miah handed over the money.

'I know your people, mate. I know what they like,' the man said.

Jolil took one chair and his father took the other. They passed through the crowd.

'You've got to know how to get things at their proper price - these traders are very sharp,' his father said to Jolil as they emerged from the bustle of the market. Jolil knew they'd been insulted, the man had jeered at them. He walked with his eyes on the pavement. There was no way a man could swallow an insult and still look the world in the eye. One day, he thought, one day he'd be ready. He wouldn't accept walking in fear.

As they turned down Chicksand Street, on the last lap home, pausing every few yards and transferring the awkward weight of the chairs from arm to arm, Jolil saw two of the youths who had been in the gang on Friday night. They were standing on the pavement, leaning against the wall as they had done that night.

'These rubbish people are still there,' his father said. 'When they are in ones and twos they are not so bold, eh? I'll smash this chair over their heads if they say anything to me.' He was strolling with confidence now.

'Men should be as afraid of killing as they are of dying,' he said, and gathering his spit, he spat on the pavement.

'What are you spittin' outside our flats for?' one of the white boys said as they approached them.

'Leave it, leave it, leave it,' Mr Miah said in English.

'I'll give you leave it,' one of the boys said, stepping forward as they passed him.

'Just keep walking, just hold the chair out if he comes,' Mr Miah said in Bengali to Jolil.

The youth was upon them. He grabbed Mr Miah's jacket collar from the back.

He tried to wrench loose, dropping his chair. The boy wore a red sweater, and its tightness made his muscles look menac-

ingly large. There was a flash of spite in his face.

'Oi, you want to go and clean up that gob you made there.'

'No, thank you,' said Jolil's father, hastily. 'Just move on, hurry on,' he added, in Bengali, to Jolil.

'Ah, no-speak-d-English, eh? You know damn well what I said, now come back here and clean it up.'

The other youth came strolling up and positioned himself in front of Jolil's father. 'You ain't bolting anywhere, curly-caps,' he said. 'You're going to do as my mate says and clean up your gob.'

He picked up the chair that Mr Miah had dropped and banged it emphatically on the pavement. Then he sat on it.

'Why you trouble an old man?' Jolil's father said. He was beginning to plead.

Suddenly Jolil felt he couldn't take it any more. 'Get off, it's our chair,' he said, rushing up to the seated youth and trying to pull the chair from under him.

'You want to digest your teeth, Paki junior?' the youth said.

'It's a very young boy, little boy,' his father said, holding up his hand as if in surrender. He walked back to the place where he'd spat and began shuffling his shoes over the pavement.

'I said with your tongue, not with your Tesco bombers,' the young man said.

Jolil picked up the chair he'd been carrying, lifted it and rushed at the young man. He nimbly stepped aside, jerked the chair out of Jolil's hands and flung it a few yards off. Then he jumped on Jolil and slapped him with his open hands on both cheeks, pushing him off as Jolil rushed at him in between the resounding flat blows.

'Don't you get funny with me,' the youth said between his teeth. Jolil threw himself at him again. The youth got him by the front of his shirt, held him at arms' length and flung him to the ground. Then he pounced on him, kicking him, as Jolil tried to cover his face.

'Then he heard his father's voice behind the young man.

'Very sorry, very sorry,' he was saying,

and then in Urdu, 'in the name of all-seeing Allah.'

The youth who was kicking Jolil let out a little yelp.

'Aaaaah, you bastard,' Jolil heard him say, and he fell to his knees as though he had dropped something on the pavement. Jolil's father screamed to him to run, to leave the chairs. He scrambled to his feet and ran after his father. For a few seconds the other youth ran behind them and then he turned and went back to his companion who was still kneeling on the pavement, screaming as though he had looked in the face of murder. Jolil didn't turn. Neither he nor his father stopped till they reached the broken archway of their own building.

Khalil was at home when they walked in.

'What about the chairs?' his mother asked, and then, seeing the red marks on Jolil's face, 'Oh, my God, what's happened to you?'

'We couldn't find any chairs,' his father said. 'Jolil tripped and fell down as we were coming back.'

'I didn't,' Jolil shouted. 'We ran ...' he started to say.

'Don't call your father a liar,' Mr Miah said. 'Go inside and wash your face.'

'Why did you run away?' Khalil demanded. 'Who chased you? I'll kill them.'

'I'm not a man of violence,' his father said, 'and the day that sons of mine can tell their father what to do, is the day I want to stop living.'

'If you live like a rat you've already stopped living,' Khalil said.

'Don't answer back, boy. Nobody's been hurt. We're all right. Allah has brought us safely home.'

Khalil wasn't going to speak against Allah. He turned on his heel and walked out of the house.

Jolil's face was burning now, with the slap and with the shame he felt. He didn't venture to tell his mother what had happened. He felt they had lost more than the chairs; they had lost the right to walk on the street. They had lost face. His feet, which should have been shooting kicks

He was going to explain, Jolil thought, he was going to give away the secret. As he talked, the picture showed the crew

of a film studio setting things up in the background. Then the Chinese man, to whom the white man had been talking, jumped off a wall on which he was perched. The cameramen recorded the jump. The man threw his arms out as he leapt. The white commentator held the film up to the audience.

'So we play it backwards,' he said. The film inside the film was played backwards and it showed the same jump in reverse, looking like the Chinese man had jumped up on to the wall.

Jolil watched it in silence. The film moved to other rooms in the studio. An actor posed next to a dummy of himself. 'Ain't it good,' one of the boys next to him said.

The dummy's head was struck off, the fountains of blood began to pour from it, and its neck was held up to the camera to show how the blood was made to gush out of a pen-sized capsule. 'All this happens at twenty-four frames a second in an ordinary film, the speed of normal life. What happens when you slow the camera down?' There was another shot of the Chinese man aiming kicks to the jaws of other actors. He did it slowly, deliberately, and the director of the film posed the extras in expressions of surprise. There was another shot of the same action at what seemed to be incredible speed. 'Celluloid has created the Kung Fu superman, running, leaping and fighting with fists of speeded-up fury.'

The whole film was like that. When the lights were switched on and Mr Morrisson came to the front of the hall and said that they'd have ten minutes extra on their lunchtime, Jolil turned to Errol. Most of the others were indifferent to what they had seen.

'In the book that Morrisson gave me,

at the jaws of danger, had followed each other hastily home.

That night he lay on his back awake, his mind filled with the rage of their helplessness. The house was dark, the rest of the family was asleep. Jolil heard a noise in the kitchen. He heard the tap running and the sound of feet trying to tiptoe and then the sound of creaking wood. He got up from his bed and went through the front room quietly and peered into the kitchen. His father was kneeling on the floor in the dark. He turned his head over his shoulder, startled at Jolil's approach.

'Go back to sleep,' he said, sternly.

Jolil stood in the darkened doorway, not obeying his father. The dirty lino on the floor of the kitchen had been turned up, and his father was fiddling with a hammer with one of the floorboards. 'Listen, son,' he said, getting to his feet and turning round, whispering almost. 'Don't ever tell anyone, not even your mother or Khalil, that we bought any chairs or about those men.'

'I won't,' Jolil said. They had run away; he didn't want to tell anyone that his father was a coward. 'Don't worry. I won't.'

The next morning his mother brought some white paste she'd made up and put it on Jolil's cheek. Jolil washed it off, brushed his hair, and, taking the long route, went to school.

In the darkness of the sports' hall, the kids whistled and cheered as Bruce Lee appeared on the screen, leaping over walls, dodging out of the path of bullets, tackling six of his enemies at the same time and laying them flat. Then the film turned from colour to black-and-white. A man in a suit was addressing the audience. '... so we take a look at the world in which the stars of this international cult live. We look at the way in which this game is played, we look at the magic and illusion of Kung Fu ...' There were more shots of men lopping off other men's heads with the swipe of a braced palm. The blood flowed and the third year cheered. Then the white man came on the screen again.

it said that Bruce Lee could really jump on to a ten-foot wall.'

'Bruce Lee dead,' Errol replied.

'It's stupid, I reckon,' said another boy in their row. 'Kung Fu is for mongers.'

'White man spoil everything,' Errol said.

Jolil didn't stay to school in the afternoon. He went back home. He couldn't make up his mind about how he felt about the shattered secret. Maybe the film was lying, all Kung Fu was not like that, it wasn't all tricks.

When he got to their building, Jolil could see three police cars parked outside. There were policemen in the courtyard and several people from the flats were outside talking to them. The women and children leaned out of the windows.

Jolil burst through the door of their flat. His father was sitting at the machine, his spectacles sliding down his nose.

'What's going on here? What're the police doing in our buildings?'

'You want to mind the world's business? You'll have to have a million lives.'

'A white boy was stabbed at the end of the street yesterday evening,' Khalil said. Khalil was looking out of their window. 'The police want to know if any of the children found a knife or anything in the street while playing.'

'Why should we get involved in white man's quarrels?' his father said, threading the machine after licking the thread.

'It wasn't a white man who stabbed him,' Khalil said. 'It was some Bengalis and they left some chairs behind on the pavement.'

'Don't talk loosely, letting your tongue wag in your head. We've got all the chairs we need in this house,' his father said, still at the machine.

Then he turned to Jolil. 'Go and take two pounds from my purse and go down to Brick Lane and buy me a pair of cutters' scissors. Take the long route.'