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## **Bow Ties and Skullcaps**

**Narrative Voice and Islamism in *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane***

**Title:** Bow Ties and Skullcaps: Narrative Voice and Islamism in *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane*

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**Abstract:** *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* both comment on contemporary multicultural London. However, *White Teeth* was written before 9/11 whereas *Brick Lane* was written afterwards. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were the biggest catalyst for tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West. Consequently, concerns about the threat of Islamism and terrorism became the main concern in the Islamophobic discourse, rather than merely racist or xenophobic motives. Since 9/11, Islamophobia has only increased in Britain in the twenty-first century. This thesis will examine the use of narrative voice in the portrayal of Islamist organisations and British-born young Muslims, Millat and Karim, in *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, which was published before 9/11, and in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali respectively, which was published after 9/11. By using an omniscient narrator who highlights the irony of KEVIN and Millat's membership of KEVIN, Islamism is satirised in *White Teeth*. In contrast, in *Brick Lane* the autodiegetic narrator Nazneen creates empathy for Karim and the Islamist organisation the Bengal Tigers.

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## Introduction

Since their publication at the start of the twenty-first century, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) have attracted both praise and criticism. Both novels comment on contemporary multicultural London, *White Teeth* through its vast scope of different characters from different backgrounds, one of the protagonist families being Bengali Muslim, *Brick Lane* through a more introspective view of the Bengali Muslim community in Tower Hamlets. However, *White Teeth* was written and published before the events of 9/11, whereas *Brick Lane* was written and published afterwards. Hence, the novels explore Muslim presence in London in a time when "anti-immigrant prejudice" and "migrant alienation" changed to "a new and insidious form of religious discrimination", meaning Islamophobia (Upstone, "Same Old" 344). Remarkably, these postcolonial novels both feature fictional Islamist groups, KEVIN in *White Teeth* and the Bengal Tigers in *Brick Lane*. Since 9/11, "political expressions of Muslim identity have been labelled as extremism, fundamentalism, or Islamism" (Gunning 66). The characters who join these organisations are Millat and Karim, British-born Muslims from immigrant parents. This thesis aims to research the use of narrative voice in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* regarding the depiction of Islamist groups and its appeal to British-born Muslims before 9/11 and after 9/11. Before 9/11, Islamism could be satirised, as KEVIN is in *White Teeth* by using an ironic omniscient narrator, whereas after 9/11, a hardened political climate asked for more empathy for British Muslims, which is shown in *Brick Lane* by using an autodiegetic narrator.

### Pre- and Post-9/11: A Background to Islamophobia in Britain

Islamophobia in Britain is not a new phenomenon, but a consequence of worldwide tensions between the Islamic civilisation and the (predominantly) Christian West. In his book *The Fear of Islam*, Todd Green, a specialist on Islamophobia in the West, describes the history of these tensions. The Orientalist worldview arose in the nineteenth century and dominated for a long time in the West. This is the idea that there are fundamental differences between Western and Islamic civilisation, in which the West is superior to the Muslim world (Green 80). This view is based on various stereotypes in which Islam is monolithic, fanatic, irrational and exploitive of women (Green 81). The Islamic world has become increasingly anti-Western, which was partly due to the colonial dominion of the West in a great part of the Muslim world from the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century in which “European authorities were confronted with religious insurgency and Islamic anti-colonialism” (Motadel 841). After decolonisation, many colonies remained economically dependent on their former colonisers, which enforced anti-Western sentiment amongst Muslim countries as many blame their political and economic struggles on past Western interference (Green 74). Moreover, Israel, meant to be a Jewish state, was created in Muslim Palestine and officially proclaimed in 1948, causing multiple wars between the Palestinians and Israelis, most notably the Six-Day War in 1967 (Shepard 249-250). Palestine was a British colony and the creation of Israel was supported by many Western countries.

However, the biggest worldwide catalyst for tensions between the Muslims and non-Muslims was 9/11. ‘9/11’ refers to 11 September 2001, when four airplanes were hijacked by al-Qaeda terrorists. Two airplanes collided with the World Trade Centre in New York City, a third crashed on a field in Pennsylvania and the last crashed into the Pentagon in Washington D.C (Green 101). Al-Qaeda is an Islamic terrorist organisation, established by the Saudi Arabian Usama bin Laden and the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, primarily as a reaction to the

Western, specifically American, dominance over Muslims (Shepard 325-329). As a result of 9/11, US president George Bush declared a 'War on Terror', a doctrine of "pre-emptive war, unilateral policymaking and 'regime change' in 'rogue states'" (Holloway 4), which meant the US invaded the 'rogue states' Afghanistan and Iraq. Many parts of Afghanistan were controlled by the Taliban, the Islamic government (Green 118). However, no credible evidence has been found that Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, was linked to the events of 9/11 (Holloway 5). The Bush doctrine was backed by Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of Great Britain (Green 121). Bush, supported by Blair, was now directly targeting Islamic governments.

Consequently, concerns about the threat of political Islam and terrorism became the main concern in the Islamophobic discourse, rather than merely racist or xenophobic motives. In chapter six of the 1997 report from the Runnymede Commission, which focuses on racial violence directed at Muslims in Britain, the fear of terrorism is not even mentioned. They even argue that while "there is evidence of increased racist violence within Britain at times of international tension", for example during the Gulf War, "'paki-bashing', as white adolescents call it, is primarily anti-Asian and anti-immigrant" (Runnymede 41). In contrast, more recent research defines Islamophobia partly as a fear of Muslim-related terrorism and the potential implementation of Shari'a (Shepard 335) and Islamophobic public discourse as often equating Islam with terrorism, misogyny and backwardness (Green 26). Moreover, as a justification of the War on Terror, politicians began to use an Islamophobic narrative portraying Islam as violent, antidemocratic, and misogynist (Green 103). For example, in his speech to the Congress on the War of Terror, Bush asserted that the terrorists who act in the name of Islam hate America because they hate the freedom and democracy it represents (Bush). He therefore implied that Islamism is anti-democratic. Furthermore, not only politicians are prone to an Islamophobic discourse; media coverage also often focuses on violence and terrorism carried

out by Muslims (Green 12). According to Khan et al., the misrepresentation of Muslims by Western media “has been influential in the spread of *Islamophobia* in the West” and this misrepresentation dominates as an alternative image is not offered by scholars in the Muslim world (5-6). Fox News is an example of a right-wing American television station “at the heart of the public scaremongering about Islam” (Lean 66). Clearly, since the events of 9/11 prejudice against Muslims and Islamophobia in public discourse have expanded.

Since 9/11 and the War on Terror, Islamophobia has only increased in Britain in the twenty-first century. As a result of globalisation and postcolonialism the Muslim population in Britain has grown tremendously since the 1950s, when workers from the Indian subcontinent were brought to the northern industries and Greater London (Nasser 7-8). It was common for Muslim men to come to Great Britain on their own to find work with the expectation to return to their home country eventually (Shepard 331). However, as immigration laws became stricter, many Muslim workers decided to stay and settle with their families (Nasser 8). By 2011, Muslims made up 4.8% of the entire population in England and Wales (White). The first major event which revealed the tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims on British soil, was the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie in 1988. The novel made many allusions to Islam and was regarded as an attempt at ridicule by many Muslims in Britain, causing a massive demonstration in Bradford where protestors burned the book (Green 159-160). In 1997 13% of the Pakistanis and 9% of the Bangladeshis in Britain, who make up the majority of Britain’s Muslim population, said to have been racially harassed in the previous 12 months (Runnymede 40). After 9/11, 80% of the Muslims who were surveyed by the Open Society Institute had experienced Islamophobia and the number of Muslims stopped and searched at the airport had risen 302% between 2001 and 2003 (Manzoor). Young British Muslims are especially affected by Islamophobia, developing “a sense of cultural inferiority” and losing “confidence both in themselves and in their



parents” (Runnymede 12). Growing up in a British society that shows an increasing hostility to the culture and religion they inherited from their family, many young Muslims are conflicted in their cultural identity.

This thesis will examine the use of narrative voice in the portrayal of Islamist organisations and British-born young Muslims, Millat and Karim respectively, in *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, which was published before 9/11, and in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, which was published after 9/11. Over time, Muslim identity had to be redefined with the coming of the second generation, who were born and raised in the host country and stood culturally between their parents and their environment (Shepard 331). Many young Muslims join youth organisation or extremist organisations to navigate living in a non-Muslim country as a Muslim (Runnymede 17). There has been some debate on the correct terminology for extremist Muslim organisations, which are often called ‘fundamentalist’ by the media (Runnymede 7). Originally, the term ‘fundamentalism’ was used in a Christian context, referring to the World Christian Fundamentalist Association, which sought to re-affirm “historic Christian theology, morality and interpretation of scripture” (Runnymede 7). The word ‘fundamentalism’ was first used about Islam in 1935 (OED Online) but started to gain currency in 1981 when in an article in *The Observer*, Anthony Burgess called ‘fundamentalism’ a weapon used by ayatollahs to run a modern state, linking fundamentalism to the Islamic revolution in Iran (Runnymede 7). However, the use of ‘fundamentalism’ is controversial. According to William Shepard, professor of Religious Studies, ‘fundamentalism’ is considered by many to be misleading. He prefers ‘Islamism’, referring to “those who call for the application of the Shari’a in all areas of community life, especially government, in the modern context, whether they are violent or not”, as it is more accurate and neutral (Shepard 245). Furthermore, Todd Green uses ‘Islamism’ interchangeably with political Islam (106). Lastly, John Strawson describes ‘Islamism’ as making no distinction

between politics and religion, Islam as a finished system and often authoritarian (11). In reference to Muslim organisations with a clear political purpose, this thesis employs the term 'Islamist organisation'.

“We Are Aware That We Have an Acronym Problem”

KEVIN and Irony in *White Teeth*

With an increase in the Muslim population in Britain, the need for representation of Muslims and their organisations in the media also increased, literature included. In her novel *White Teeth* Zadie Smith features a Muslim Bengali family Samad, Alsana, and their twin boys Magid and Millat, who were born in Britain. Smith was born to a British father and a Jamaican mother in North London and earned a degree in English from Cambridge University (Meyer 481). She started her writing career in the nineties: a quiet period after the collapse of the Soviet Union but before 9/11, in which many people “had been able to avert their eyes from [history’s] messy presence” (Dawson 71). She was part of a tradition of authors who “tried their hand at the now” and “sought to write the next big NOVEL” (Marcus 67). These authors wanted to “rebuild the world rather than deconstruct it” and their novels are “encyclopedic in detail” (Marcus 67). Smith’s novel *White Teeth* can rightfully be called encyclopedic as it tells the story of three families in North London with different cultural backgrounds over an extensive period of time: from the Second World War until 1999. In the novel, the British Archie forms a friendship with the Bengali Samad when they fight in the Second World War together. Smith alternates between ‘Bangladeshi’ and ‘Bengali’ when she describes the characters from Bengal, a region in the country referred to as East-Pakistan after the partition with India in 1947, which became Bangladesh in 1971 (Schendel 96). However, Samad seems to identify the most with Bengal, as before the independence of India he was more in favour of giving independence to Bengal and “leave India in bed with the British” (Smith 88). ‘Bengali’ will therefore be used in reference to those who have their roots in Bangladesh. The two men continue their friendship when Samad moves to London with his young Bengali wife Alsana and fathers twin boys Millat and Magid. Archie marries the much younger Jamaican Clara with whom he has a daughter, Irie. Later in the novel, Irie befriends

the middle-class Jewish-Catholic Chalfen family, whose son Joshua is a classmate of Irie. Smith represents the British multicultural society she grew up in, within the literary tradition characteristic of the nineties.

The novel is satirical in its representation of multicultural Britain and especially of the experience of the British-born Muslim characters. Although Smith herself uses the term 'second-generation' to denote the children who are born in Britain to immigrant parents, this thesis will prefer the term 'British-born'. As Sarah Upstone argues, 'second-generation Asians' seems to imply that their grandparents are not Asian, whereas 'second-generation immigrants' or 'second-generation migrants' implies that the British-born characters have travelled from somewhere, which is not the case ("Same Old" 341). 'British-born' will therefore be used in this thesis as a more neutral term to denote children born in Britain of immigrant parents. The British-born characters in *White Teeth*, Irie, Millat and Magid, often find themselves in ironic situations with "tragicomic results" (Dawson 75). Irony is "a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance" (Baldick). The irony in *White Teeth* is presented through the omniscient narrator of the story. The omniscient narrator is heterodiegetic, which means that they are not part of the story themselves, and therefore remains at a distance from the story (Brillenburger and Rigney 178). The omniscient narrator in *White Teeth* highlights the ironic situations in Irie, Millat and Magid's lives. According to Ulrike Tancke, irony is used to seemingly neutralise the message of the novel, "the characters' fates as first- and second-generation immigrants in Britain" and "the painful effects of ethnic mixing and the blurring of racial and cultural boundaries" (28), although she also argues that at a closer look it attracts "careful scrutiny and honest appreciation" (32). In this sense, the text is inherently ironic as the message of the novel is at odds with what one might expect. By using an ironic omniscient narrator, Smith satirises

Islamism as Millat joins an Islamist organisation not out of religious anger, but because he longs for group identification and action inspired by Western gangster movies, which is at odds with the anti-Western message of KEVIN.

Millat feels alienated in Britain as the child of immigrant parents, but the comments that are made on his ethnicity and immigrant history almost never refer to his religious identity. When his teacher Poppy Burt-Jones asks Millat about the music he likes to listen to at home, she pushes him to refer to music from Bengali culture: “Sometimes we find other people’s music strange because their culture is different from *ours*” (Smith 155). Millat answers that he likes Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson, not discerning that Poppy is looking for a different answer (Smith 156). Poppy perceives Millat as different from her principally in terms of culture and not necessarily religion. Furthermore, Millat encounters racism when he visits Mr. Hamilton with Magid and Irie to bring him food as part of a harvest festival project. Mr. Hamilton uses old-fashioned derogatory language when he speaks of black people and South Asians as “nigger” and “wogs” (171-172). Moreover, he insists that there were no Pakistanis in the British army during the Second World War, because “what would we have fed them?” (Smith 172). Again, the emphasis is on ethnicity and culture, rather than on religion. Lastly, when Millat is at the train station with his friends to buy a ticket to Bradford, the ticket man implies, based on their outward appearance, that they are a criminal, who mugs old ladies (Smith 230). The ticket man is annoyed when Millat and his crew speak English mixed with Jamaican, Bengali and Gujarati: “Can’t tell me in English? Have to talk in your Paki language?” (Smith 231). Although the ticket man is clearly prejudiced against a group of British-born youths with a visible immigrant background, he does not use an Islamophobic narrative. Hence, Millat often meets prejudice based on his ethnicity and mixed British-Bengali culture, but there are no instances when the abuse is Islamophobic specifically.

The desire for group identification and action is best exemplified when Millat is headed to the demonstration against Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford together with his crew, the Raggastanis. Millat discovers it is easier to claim your position in society as a group. The Raggastanis are a hybrid group, with a clear Muslim identity as "Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck *geezzer* who would fight in their corner if necessary" (Smith 231). In their philosophy, they mix Western popular culture with Islam, such as "Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee" (Smith 231). Their language is a mix of "Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English" (Smith 231), which according to Jarica Linn Watts implies a type of "group identification in response to white racism" (855). The Raggastanis go to the demonstration, but not because they feel that *The Satanic Verses* ridicules Islam; in fact, Millat has not even read the novel and "could not identify the book if it lay in a pile of other books" (Smith 233). The appeal of the demonstration is group identification. Suddenly Millat saw people like him, British-born Muslims, act against their outsider status as immigrants or children of immigrants:

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshipped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently be murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands.

(Smith 233-234)

Consequently, Millat sees that he can respond to the racism he encounters, like the people he sees on television. He is fed up with feeling like not having a voice in the country he grew up in: “We’ve taken it too long in this country” (Smith 233). Hence, the Rushdie affair marks a turning point for Millat as he realises the importance of group identification and taking action.

Eventually, Millat’s longing for group identification and action takes form in a membership of the Islamist group the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation. Their message is political, and KEVIN is described as “a radical new movement where politics and religion were two sides of the same coin” (Smith 470). The organisation is anti-Western and in favour of a society based on Shari’a. According to its leader, Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah, democracy and freedom have only brought oppression and chaos (Smith 467). His goal is to show the world that “the Creator’s laws still exist and are eternal” (Smith 475). Although the organisation’s message seems serious, Smith presents it with irony through the omniscient narrator. There are multiple references in the novel to the problematic nature of the organisation’s acronym, KEVIN: “Irie frowned. ‘KEVIN?’ ‘We are aware,’ said Hifan solemnly, pointing to the spot underneath the cupped flame where the initials were minutely embroidered, ‘that we have an acronym problem.’” (Smith 295). KEVIN’s goal is to enlighten people, to “take people by the hand and lift them up” (Smith 294) and take them out of ignorance into Islam. However, the word KEVIN is also British slang for ‘fool’ (Dawson 75). Hence, although KEVIN has the characteristics of a serious organisation with an Islamist purpose, it is presented with irony.

Particularly, Millat chooses to join the Islamist organisation KEVIN as he associates the organisation with Western gangster movies, which appeal to him as it shows him that you can take fate in your own hands. Inevitably, the British-born characters are influenced by the Western hegemony, which means “political, economic, or military predominance or

leadership, esp. by one member of a confederacy or union over other states” (OED Online). For several centuries and mainly due to colonial power, the Western hegemony has been prevalent, starting with the English, French and Spanish (Bowen 180). In the past decades, owing to economic dominance, American popular culture has become dominant everywhere in the world (Bowen 182-183). Millat in particular is susceptible to the influence of the Western hegemony. As a child, Millat’s favourite place is the local video shop, where he learns of “godfathers, blood-brothers, pacinodeniros, men in black who looked good, who talked fast, who never waited a (mutherfuckin’) table, who had two, fully functioning, gun-toting hands” (Smith 217). The gangster movies present to Millat a world of clans who engage in violent action. He associates KEVIN with the clans he has seen in gangster movies: “Millat loved clans. He had joined KEVIN because he loved clans (and the outfit and the bow tie), and he loved clans at war” (Smith 442). The first thing he notices before he joins the organisation are the suits that the members are wearing, which remind him of gangsters: “Look at the suit . . . gangster stylee!” (Smith 294). The organisation offers him a way of channelling his anger, but it was “not the righteous anger of a man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster, a juvenile delinquent, determined to prove himself, determined to run the clan, determined to beat the rest” (Smith 447). Millat does not join KEVIN out of religious conviction but is drawn in by the gangster-like appearance of the organisation. Clearly, the appeal is based on a childhood fantasy of being part of a mafia-like gang rather than Muslim ideology.

Moreover, Millat’s obsession with gangster movies presents a dual irony as these movies are directly at odds with the anti-Western Islamist organisation and eventually does not give Millat the action he longs for. In the first place, the gangster movies represent Western popular culture, which is the exact opposite of the anti-Western ideology of KEVIN. KEVIN is critical of Western morals; Millat is repeatedly asked to “purge [him]self from the



taint of the West” (Smith 444). Moreover, the organisation spreads anti-Western leaflets, such as “*The Right to Bare: The Naked Truth about Western Sexuality*”, offering a critique of the public sexuality of Western women (Smith 372-374). Indeed, Islamism, together with communism, is one of the few ideologies who have been able to resist the American cultural hegemony (Bowen 183). According to KEVIN, Hollywood movies are the worst example of the corruption of the West and especially the gangster mafia genre (Smith 445). Millat’s motivation for joining KEVIN is thus ironic: it is directly at odds with the message of the organisation. Furthermore, Millat longs for violent action, which KEVIN promises to give to him: “the questions of honour, sacrifice, duty, the life and death questions that came with the careful plotting of clan warfare, the very reasons Millat joined KEVIN” (Smith 501). However, this action is taken away from him in the end as the organisation decides in the end not to use violence at the FutureMouse launch, where Marcus Chalfen presents his genetically modified mouse. To Millat’s frustration, Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah is arrested before the event and the members have decided to recite a verse of the Qu’ran in Arabic, rather than using violence (Smith 500). Millat decides to take fate into his own hands and brings a gun to the venue (Smith 526). However, even this attempt at violent action without the involvement of KEVIN is taken away from him. Before Millat can shoot the gun, it is taken from him by Archie (Smith 533). Hence, Millat’s obsession with gangster movies and violent action as reasons to join an Islamist organisation turn out to be ironic.

Empathy and Diversity: the Bengal Tigers in *Brick Lane*

Whereas the nineties seemed to be an interval in history and there was room for authors like Zadie Smith to experiment freely, this changed after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. What was now needed in literature was not “exuberant experiment” but empathy (Marcus 68-69). After 9/11, literature attempted to make its readers identify with and understand its characters. In this period, the wake of 9/11 and a world which became increasingly hostile towards Muslims, Monica Ali wrote her novel *Brick Lane*. Ali was born in Dhaka to a British mother and a Bangladeshi father who fled to Bolton, Great Britain, during the war for independence from Pakistan (Ziegler 147). The focaliser in the novel is Nazneen, a Bengali Muslim woman who comes to Tower Hamlets in East London to marry the much older Chanu. They have three children together, son Raqib, who dies as an infant, and daughters Shahana and Bibi. In contrast to *White Teeth*, which has characters from several cultures and backgrounds, *Brick Lane*'s key characters are exclusively Bengali. In the novel, Nazneen engages in an affair with Karim, who is active in the Islamist organisation the Bengal Tigers. Through its realist autodiegetic narrative, the novel creates empathy for the Bengali Muslim community in Tower Hamlets and although the Bengal Tigers is a trivial group in the end, the group undermines the idea of a monolithic Islam and Islamism.

The empathy for Islam in the novel is emphasised through its realist narrative voice, focalised by Nazneen, and its focus on the Bengali Muslim community. According to Sarah Upstone, the novel is realist as “it fulfils the commitment to the location of characters within identifiable historical context, everyday reality, and the focus on individuals from mundane social backgrounds that are the features of the realist novel” (“Representation” 166). Moreover, *Brick Lane* is told by an autodiegetic narrator, which means that the narrator, Nazneen, is the protagonist of the story (Brillenburger and Rigney 178). In the case of *Brick Lane*, the autodiegetic narrator takes form in third person, with Nazneen as focaliser. By

using an autodiegetic narrator, with a third person focaliser, the story of the novel and the protagonist's personal experience converge (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney 184). The distance between the reader and the protagonist Nazneen is small. The Tower Hamlets Bengali Muslim community is presented from within as it focuses on the everyday life of Nazneen over almost twenty years, during a period of time when many people from the Indian subcontinent moved to Britain. The location remains the same throughout the novel as it almost entirely takes place in London and in Tower Hamlets specifically, with the exception of Nazneen's sister Hasina's letters, which take place in Bangladesh. This realism has also invited much criticism, which mainly focuses on the unrealistic conclusion of the novel, when Nazneen integrates easily into British culture, and not so much on Ali's representation of the Bangladeshi community (Upstone, "Representation" 165). Moreover, as Nazneen almost never leaves the estate in Tower Hamlets, she is confined to the Bengali community and most of the characters in the novel are Bengali Muslims. One of the few persons who is mentioned who is not Bengali, is the tattoo lady: "The tattoo lady was always there when Nazneen looked out across the dead grass and broken paving stones to the block opposite" (Ali 17). However, although Nazneen thinks about going over to meet her, she eventually never does as she does not see the point of it (Ali 19). By using an autodiegetic narrator, Ali reduces the distance between the reader and Nazneen, which invites empathy from the reader for Nazneen and her community.

The narrative voice affects the representation of British-born character Karim in the novel as well. Aside from his handsome physique, religion plays an important role in Nazneen's attraction to Karim, but Nazneen does not necessarily always agree with Karim on Islamic matters. Her attraction to Karim is linked to his religiosity, as she finds the experience of watching him pray "erotic" (Cormack 704). She finds the movements he makes in prayer and the fact that he does not stammer during prayer attractive (Ali 234-235). Her physical

attraction to Karim is therefore linked to his piety. When she daydreams about Karim, it is clear that she finds both his appearance and his piety attractive: “His neck, thought Nazneen, was just right. Not too thick, and not too thin. And he was taqwa. More God-conscious than her own husband” (Ali 255). However, although she is attracted to Karim’s piety, Nazneen does not necessarily respond to or agree with his ideas on Islam and radicalism. For example, Karim respects Muslims who are willing to sacrifice themselves to their religion, whereas Nazneen emphasises that Muslims are not allowed to commit suicide (Ali 382). Moreover, although she notices Karim’s growing radicalism, she does not respond to it. When Karim starts to wear Islamic dress, “Nazneen felt that Karim did not want her to mention the new clothes. The matter was either too trivial or else too important to discuss” (Ali 376). She is observant and, usually implicitly, rejects some of Karim’s ideas.

Although to Nazneen Karim seems to be confident in Britain at first, she discovers that, similar to Millat in *White Teeth*, Karim’s motive for joining the Bengal Tigers is feeling alienated in Britain and looking for group identification. According to Alistair Cormack, Nazneen is attracted to Karim due to his Western appearance (704). Karim wears Western clothing, sneakers and a golden necklace (Ali 210). He is more confident in English than in Bengali: “When he spoke in Bengali he stammered. In English, he found his voice and it gave him no trouble” (Ali 210). Moreover, he feels more connected to Britain than Bangladesh, as he answers, “this is my country”, referring to Britain, when Nazneen speaks about Bangladesh as “our country” (Ali 212). However, as the novel progresses, Nazneen discovers that Karim is less confident in British society than he seems. As he was bullied at school for his ethnicity, he feels that of all ethnicities, being Bengali was the least cool, as “you couldn’t just be yourself. Bangladeshi” (Ali 263). His father was a bus driver and often racially abused, called names and even had a tooth knocked out (Ali 233). In the end, Nazneen discovers that he does not only stammer in Bengali, but also in English (Ali 452-453). Karim experiences that his

Bengali identity puts him at a disadvantage in society. Nevertheless, he felt empowered when he was united with other British Bengali kids: “We went everywhere together, we started to fight, and we got a reputation” (Ali 260). Like Millat in *White Teeth*, Karim discovers that as a group, it is easier to claim your position in society as a disadvantaged minority. When he becomes older, the longing for group empowerment translates to him becoming the founding member of the Islamist group the Bengal Tigers. According to David Gunning, Karim’s “politics are seen as a quest for the definite identity he feels has been denied him” (101). The Bengal Tigers are a response to the Lion Hearts, who use an Islamophobic narrative to support their anti-multiculturalist position. In their “Multicultural Murder” leaflet, they speak about Islam as a religion of “hate and intolerance” and they claim that “Muslim extremists are planning to turn Britain into an Islamic Republic” (Ali 251). Karim finds group identification in the Bengal Tigers, the Muslims in his community.

The Bengal Tigers have a political purpose, but the members are versatile in their opinions on the degree and focus of the group’s politics. The group is Islamist as it is anti-Western and their goal is action-oriented and political. They distribute leaflets which are critical of the degradation of Western women “showing their body parts in public places” (Ali 258). The political dimension of the organisation is evident from these leaflets as they urge people to take political action by writing to the council (Ali 258). Although the Bengal Tigers are not directly violent, they plan to use action and not just words. The Questioner, one of the founders of the Bengal Tigers, wants action rather than debating and is reassured by Karim that when Karim is elected Chairman, “the action will begin straight away” (Ali 242). They even have a religious leader, recently imported from Bengal and therefore unaware of what goes on at the meetings (Ali 242). However, the ideas regarding the mission of the group vary widely. Some girls want to fight for women’s rights, some want violent action and others want “no trouble” (Ali 240). In the end, their mission is still very general as they claim to be

“for Muslim rights and culture” and “protecting our local ummah and supporting the global ummah” (Ali 241). This mission is open to interpretation as the Muslim community consists of many people of many backgrounds. Moreover, protecting the ummah can be done in many ways, from violence to peaceful negotiations, from local action to global action. The diversity of opinion within the group also becomes evident when Nazneen encounters a member of the Bengal Tigers months after the group broke up. The boy asserts that he always disagreed with some of the aspects of the Bengal Tigers, such as allowing women to join (Ali 486). Although the group’s importance and professionalism are dubious as their religious leader is unaware of its problems, and they split up in the end, the group shows the diversity in opinion that can exist within Islamist organisations.

Lastly, the tensions between Muslim immigrants and white Brits culminated in the riots in Oldham and become even more tangible after 9/11. Continuous tensions between white racist organisations and the Asian Muslim community culminated in a conflict mainly between the police and Pakistani and Bangladeshi British-born youths (Waddington, King and Jobard 8-9). Nazneen sees the riots on television, “pictures of hooded young men, scarves wrapped Intifada-style around their faces, hurling stones” (Ali 276). She does not seem to sympathise with the Muslim rioters, as she wonders why the police are not “simply taking their lathis and charge” (Ali 276). Moreover, Nazneen and Chanu are clearly shocked when they see the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 unfold on television as “Chanu covers his face with his hands and looks through his fingers” and “Nazneen feels she must shake herself out of a trance” (Ali 366). The consequences are more personal and closer to home as Sorupa’s daughter has her hijab pulled off on the street and Nazneen’s friend Razia’s Union Jack sweatshirt is spat on (Ali 368). Karim is aware of the impending War on Terror as “the American President is preparing his Crusade” (374). He compares the War on Terror to the medieval crusades, when Muslims and Christians were fighting each other. The novel shows

that tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims on British soil are not new but intensified after 9/11 as British society becomes more divided.

### Conclusion

The irony Smith uses neutralises the seriousness of Millat's turn to Islamism as a way of finding group identification and an active outlet for his anger. Although, as Tancke observes, the novel has "dual layers of narrative - surface comedy or irony coupled with a profoundly serious 'deep' underlying level which surfaces" (33), this deeper message does not convey a real concern for Islamism as a movement. People like Millat join Islamist organisations not from a belief in dogmatic Islam, but because they want to find a place where they belong, where they feel that they can be part of the action. Millat feels alienated in society as a child of an immigrant, but the racism or divisive narrative he encounters is not specifically Islamophobic. By using an omniscient narrator who describes KEVIN ironically, Smith is not taking Islamist organisations very seriously. Like the pre-9/11 Islamophobic narrative was not yet concerned with terrorism but more with racism based on ethnicity, the book burning of *The Satanic Verses* in *White Teeth* shows that there were tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, but there is no notion of a serious terrorist threat arising from Islamist doctrine. KEVIN is inconsequential in the end as it concentrates on violent actions, yet this is what they eventually lack as the action is taken away from them at the FutureMouse launch. As the novel was written before 9/11, an interval in history when Islamophobia was less prominent and there was room for literary experimentation, Smith was not yet constrained by history in her representation of Islamism and terrorism. Therefore, she could afford to treat the subject of Islamism with satire.

In contrast, Ali is more concerned with presenting a realist image of the Bengali Muslim community in London. *Brick Lane* is not a novel on multiculturalism with the Bengali community as a part of it, like *White Teeth*, but rather a novel about the Bengali Muslim community exclusively. By focusing on the Bengali community, with Nazneen as the autodiegetic narrator, the Muslim community is shown through a more personal and



subjective perspective. Nazneen has an affair with Karim, to whom she is attracted partly by his God-consciousness. Like Millat, Karim's motivation to join an Islamist group is a feeling of alienation and a longing for action. The tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain were already visible from Karim's childhood in Tower Hamlets onwards, long before the events of 9/11. However, after 9/11 these tensions increased, and Islamophobia was expressed through more personal attacks. Lastly, the novel shows that Islam within the British Bengali community is diversified, rather than monolithic. When the riots at Oldham take place, Nazneen does not automatically side with her community, the Asian Muslims, but rather with the police. Furthermore, although the Bengal Tigers disintegrate at the end of the novel and become as inconsequential as KEVIN, Ali emphasises the diversity in the members' ideas on Islamism. In a society with a growing Islamophobia, where Muslims are often portrayed as monolithic and irrational, Ali creates empathy for the individual in her novel. Whereas *White Teeth* has an ironic omniscient narrator, *Brick Lane* has an autodiegetic narrator, Nazneen. The omniscient narrator constantly emphasises the irony and contradictions within KEVIN and Millat's motive to join KEVIN, which makes it hard to take the organisation seriously. In contrast, through the eyes of Nazneen, Ali shows the diversity that exists within the Bengal Tigers, which creates empathy as it is easier to identify with the community. The Bengal Tigers may not be a serious threat in the end, but their ideas live on in the persons who were part of the organisation. Islamism is therefore presented as more diverse and significant in *Brick Lane* than it is in *White Teeth*.

There are limitations to this research. It must be noted that both writers are from different backgrounds, which cannot be fully disregarded when comparing their novels. Ali has a Bengali father, whereas Smith has no roots in Bangladesh at all, which gives them a different viewpoint concerning the representation of the Bengali Muslim community. As is clear from the criticism Ali received on her representation of the Bengali community, there is

more external pressure on her to represent the community as correctly as possible. Moreover, a greater variety of novels needs to be researched in order to answer the question whether and how the depiction of Muslims and Islamism in literature has changed before 9/11 compared to after 9/11. With a growing Islamophobic narrative, it is important to keep looking at the representation of Muslims in literature.

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