

MULTILINGUAL LONDON AND ITS LITERATURES

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It is almost commonplace to say that London today is ‘the multilingual capital of the world’ (*The Independent*, 29 March 1999), the ‘most ethnically diverse city’ (*Evening Standard*, 2 December 2003), perhaps even ‘the most cosmopolitan city in the world’ (*The Guardian*, 21 January 2005).

What interests me here, and what I want to explore in this essay, is how this multilingual and multicultural character of contemporary London affects the domain of literature. What literatures are being produced here today, and in what languages? What can we say about the character of these literatures, their genres, forms of expression and representations? And what about the themes and concerns that shape and define them?

Before I come to these questions, however, I will first present a range of recent data on the many languages currently spoken in London (in section 2), and outline the intercultural dynamics that accompany this multilingualism (in section 3). In section 4, I will then focus on the production of literatures in London today, both in English and in languages other than English. In particular I will discuss (in section 5) the genre of the immigration novel, and one of its best-known recent examples, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003). A central issue in this genre is that of identity and its transformations. The overall perspective from which I will discuss this issue (in section 6) is that of the French-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, who in his essay *Les identités meurtrières* (1998; English translation *On Identity*, 2000), offers a number of pertinent and stimulating insights into the problem of identity in contemporary European culture and society. A few concluding remarks are given in section 7.

My central aim here is to take the measure of the vast multilingual literary system we find in London today, and to explore how literature - like other domains of culture - may offer a meeting place and a forum for exchange for immigrant writers and the new ideas, sensibilities and imaginations they bring along with them.

I have written this essay in the spirit of Sir John Bowring (1782-1872), secretary to Jeremy Bentham when UCL was founded and the Panopticon was built, a hyperpolyglot according to Wikipedia, who ‘knew 200 languages and could speak a hundred’.

2. What do we really know? Some recent data on the linguistic diversity of London

London today, according to Dave Randall’s ‘Flora Londinica’, is the capital of botanical diversity: it has ‘about 2,400 species of flowering plants and ferns, more than the rest of Britain put together, making it arguably the most botanically rich city in the northern hemisphere’ (Randall 2003:8). New species have arrived from all over the world: ‘Californian poppies, garden angelica from Russia, Himalayan honeysuckles, Canadian goldenrod, monbretia from South Africa, antirrhinum from Majorca, shrubs like Duke of Argyll’s teaplat and cotoneasters from China, the vanilla-scented heliotrope from the Mediterranean (...), nicotiana from South America (...), and a host of others’ (Randall 2003:10). There is an interesting subtext when Randall describes these plants as exotic and alien asylum-seekers trying to put down roots, but overall he offers a clear welcome to what he sees as an enrichment of the London environment, an environment that actually fosters – rather than threatens – its 2,400 species.

For the languages of London, we find a similar diversity, but we do not have an ecological survey of the kind Randall has given for its botanical riches. It is relevant here to note that there is no language question in the British Census, so no systematic data collection is taking place. This means that most of our information will have to come from other sources.

In January 2005, *The Guardian*, analysing the most recent data from the Census 2001, published a map of the Greater London area, showing at least a hundred different ethnic communities now living in London. There are about 10,000 Afghans in Southall; 2,000 Congolese in Tottenham; 20,000 Italians in Soho and Clerkenwell; 20,000 Japanese in Barnet and Ealing; a further 20,000 Koreans in New Malden; 27,000 Portuguese in Stockwell; very many Poles in Hammersmith; some 40,000 Turks along Green Lanes in Haringey; about 15,000 Vietnamese in Hackney; and many tens of thousands of West Africans (who now outnumber the Caribbeans) in Southwark. In Soho and Millwall we find large numbers of Chinese, and in Southall there are sizable Indian and Pakistani communities (*The Guardian*, 21 January 2005). English is their common currency and also the dominant language in London, yet at the same time one can find large numbers of other languages in use in London today.

Recently, a much more refined map of London’s ethnic diversity was produced on the basis of a huge database of surnames in the UK, by the Origins Info team led by UCL’s Richard Webber (*Evening Standard*, 12 September 2006). And further migration research, based on the Census 2001, has revealed some interesting demographic trends. In 2001, immigrants made up 7.5%

of the total UK population, compared with 5.7% in 1991. The largest immigrant community in the United Kingdom (UK) are the Irish, followed by people from India, Pakistan, Germany, the Caribbean, the United States and Bangladesh. Of those born abroad, the overwhelming majority live in the south-east, with 41% of all immigrants living in London, which is now home to communities from every corner of the globe. Some, such as the Australians, the New Zealanders and the Filipinos, are doing better economically than the UK average; others, for example the Iranians, the Iraqis, the Bangladeshis and the Angolans, are doing worse than average (*The Guardian*, 8 September 2005, cf. Kyambi 2005).

The fact is, however, that while we now know a lot more about recent immigrants and their national or ethnic backgrounds, reliable data about their languages are often hard to come by. For example, even if we managed to find accurate data about the size of the Iraqi community in the UK, these numbers would give no clue to the actual languages that are spoken. How many of these Iraqis speak Arabic, how many are speakers of Turkmen, of Kurdish, Kurmanji or Aramaic? We simply do not know.

This means that if we want to have more complete and reliable figures for the languages of London, we will have to go beyond the Census and its ethnic-demographic data, and bring in data from a range of other domains - from the schools, the police and the health service, as well as from religious bodies and cultural associations – in order to build up a fuller picture of the languages and their communities of speakers in London today.

2.1. Language data from specific domains

In the search for better data, Baker and Eversley have led the way with their *Multilingual Capital* (2000), the most comprehensive survey available to date. They established that more than 300 different home languages are spoken by some 850,000 schoolchildren in total across the 32 London boroughs, and that the top ten of these languages are Arabic, Bengali, Creole, Gujarati, Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi, Turkish, Cantonese and Yoruba, each of which is spoken by at least 40,000 school children. At the other end of the scale, very many languages have just a few speakers each. What this means in practice can be seen in the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson school in Islington, where '83% of the pupils belong to ethnic minority groups, 63% are bilingual or multilingual and ..[...]...Sixty different languages are spoken within the school.' (*The Guardian*, 3 April 2004). This is now a

common situation: in 348 of inner London's 695 primary schools, at least fifty percent of children do not have English as their mother tongue (*Evening Standard*, 9 October 2006).

However, these data only concern the schools of London and are not necessarily complete, so they will need to be complemented with information from other domains.

In the domain of religion we find that while Christianity is still the most widespread, Great-Britain today, with more than 170 different religions, is clearly a multi-religious country (Morton 2000; cf. *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 December 2004). Across London, more than 25 languages other than English are regularly used for religious purposes, such as Afrikaans, Amharic, Arabic, Aramaic, Armenian, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Patois, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Sanskrit, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. And it is worth noting here that, just as Latin is by no means the only language used by Roman Catholics, so in the Islamic community, with 600,000 followers in London 'probably the most diverse anywhere in the world, besides Mecca' (*The Guardian*, 21 January 2005), Koranic Arabic is used alongside many other languages. In the International Islamic Dawah Centre near the London Central Mosque in Regent's Park, for example, one can buy 'versions of the Koran in many languages' (Reader 2002: 67), including Albanian, Chinese, English, French, Korean, Polish and Spanish.

Immigration is the obvious motor behind this. Here the health sector provides some interesting additional data. The National Health Service (NHS), for example, attracts new staff from all over the world. In 2003, some 44,000 foreign nurses and doctors joined the NHS, mostly from the Philippines, India, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Australia and China (cf. *Evening Standard*, 1 March 2004). This figure covers the UK as a whole and does not apply directly to London, although it certainly gives a further indication of the diversity of newcomers. But again – just as in the case of the Iraqis mentioned above – these demographic data do not translate directly into information about languages. We may assume that all 44,000 have some command of English, but we have only the vaguest notion of what other languages they may speak.

The same goes for the ethnic crime data collected by the metropolitan police which, for its part, has caught on to the fact that the London underworld is no less cosmopolitan than its schools, its hospitals and its religious domain. Scotland Yard has identified some fifteen ethnic gangs in various corners of the capital, which are difficult to penetrate because of language and ethnicity. There are Asian and Black gangs, Chinese

triads and Albanian pimps; there is the Italian mafia in competition with Turkish heroin importers; there are Nigerian fraudsters, Kurdish, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan gangs; we read of Jamaican Yardies, Somali qat-sellers, Algerian terrorists, and, last but not least, Eastern Europeans, especially Russians, Lithuanians, Romanians and Moldovans (*The Independent*, 5 February 2005). A relevant factor here is that not all new immigrants have sufficient English to survive on their own in London, as is clear from the 999 Emergency Service data, where incoming calls from minorities are dominated by eleven languages - Portuguese, Turkish, Punjabi, Spanish, French and Somali, followed by Tamil, Bengali, Arabic, Italian and Polish.

In the City, stockbrokers and merchant bankers of many different nationalities and speaking many different languages, do business with each other and with the rest of the world. There are jobs here for those who know their languages, as is clear from the Business Language Information Service, a useful resource which offers translating, interpreting and cultural services in over 100 different languages (Baker & Kim 2003:10). It is relevant to add that the Department of Work and Pensions now offers services in eight languages other than English: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Gujarati, Somali, Urdu, Vietnamese and Welsh. Similarly, the Public Records Office offers information for users in five languages other than English, viz. Kannada, Spanish, Tamil, Urdu and Welsh.

Further interesting data come from an institution like the Language Line, which offers telephone interpreting services that are widely used in the hospitals, in police stations and the courts, in business and the immigration service. The Language Line has speakers of some 150 different languages on call, ranging from Afrikaans, Akan and Albanian through Lingala, Malay and Pushtu to Wolof, Xhosa, Yiddish and Yoruba (*Evening Standard*, 25 June 2004).

Next, in the domain of the media, we find the BBC World Service broadcasting in 33 different languages, ranging from Arabic and Azeri through Hausa, Portuguese, Sinhala, Swahili and Tamil to Ukrainian and Uzbek. Here we note that tens of thousands of Somalis living in the Wembley area regularly tune in to this service for news and information. Similarly, the Greater London Authority (GLA) is offering its monthly newspaper, *The Londoner*, in English as well as in ten other languages (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Turkish, Urdu and Vietnamese). In June 2004, the GLA also made information about the mayoral elections available to voters in the 19 'most widely spoken foreign languages' (Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish,

Punjabi, Russian, Somali, Turkish, Urdu and Vietnamese) at its website www.londonlects.org.uk.

As for the actual size of the various communities, Baker & Eversley have given extrapolations from their data on school languages which are interestingly different from the Census data reported above. According to them there are at least eighteen communities of more than 50,000 people each in London. The largest of these are the French, estimated at 600,000 speakers, followed by speakers of Arabic (500,000), Spanish (500,000), Greek (350,000), Portuguese (300,000), Russian (200,000), and then Bengali (137,000 plus 40,000 Sylheti), Punjabi (156,000), Gujarati (150,000), Hindi (137,000), German (100,000), Turkish (74,000), Cantonese (48,000 plus 25,000 Mandarin), Somali (70,000), Caribbean Creole (51,000), Danish (50,000), Italian (50,000), Swedish (50,000) and Yoruba (48,000) (cf. *Evening Standard*, 25 June 2004).

2.2. Language data from particular locations and communities

We may add further data to our survey of London's languages by looking into the situation in specific areas and in specific language communities.

One way of measuring the existing linguistic diversity is to do a geographical cross-section of North London. First of all, on my way in to University College London (UCL), on bus 134 from suburbia to Bloomsbury, I regularly pass by signs in some 30 different languages - a Spanish or Greek church, a Hindi temple, the Hellenic Bookshop, the Gold shop in Camden which advertises its business in nine different languages, Chinese and Ethiopian restaurants, a Somali telephone shop, graffiti in Arabic, the Malaysian restaurant *Bintang*, a Tamil grocery shop, French and Italian restaurants, patisseries and pizzerias, Portuguese and Spanish tapas bars, a Romani locksmith, the *Yin Yang* Chinese traditional medicine centre, the German motto *Ich dien* on the Prince of Wales Pub, a Bengali community centre, the *Latin Quarter* shop for Spanish and Latin American music, not to mention the many newspaper kiosks with foreign journals on their stands.

Secondly, in the North-London borough of Haringey, the recent *Public Consultation on the Unitary Development Plan* was made available by the council authorities in ten languages other than English: Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, French, Greek, Kurdish, Portuguese, Romanian, Somali and Turkish. Similarly, all kinds of council leaflets with information for the general public, from refuse collection and library services to warnings about pickpockets, race hate crime, and health

campaigns, are made available in languages such as French, Greek, Kurdish and Turkish by the Haringey Translation Service. Here we note how those who don't know English are provided with information in a number of widely spoken languages. But there is no such service for languages like Abua, Bisayan and Nyakyusa, which have only a very few speakers in the borough.

Another yardstick for measuring the linguistic diversity of London is to look at specific language communities. Take for example the speakers of Japanese, a clear case of a language that is in a strong position. Japanese is in the top-forty of Baker & Eversley's *Multilingual Capital* (2000), and there are an estimated 23,000 Japanese speakers living in London, with money to spend. Through a constant new influx of Japanese tourists, businessmen, students and artists, they stay in regular contact with the language as spoken at home by some 120 million people. In London, the Japanese community has its own shops, selling Japanese books, newspapers, food and clothes; they also have their own restaurants and radio station, and for Japanese children there is the Japanese school in Ealing. Japanese can also be taken as a foreign language in secondary schools, both at GCSE and at A-level. The Japanese community is thus clearly one that can take care of itself and its language needs. It is predominantly an expatriate community, like the French, looking for contact rather than integration, with strong internal cohesion, and a low profile for the outside world.

Other language communities are not so fortunate. In strong contrast to Japanese, there is a language like Yoruba, which ranks among the top-ten languages in *Multilingual Capital*, and has an estimated 48,000 speakers living in London. In its country of origin, Nigeria, there are about 20 million speakers of Yoruba. The language has official status there, next to eight other languages including English; there are radio programs and TV in Yoruba; there is a dictionary, a grammar and a Bible translation; and the language is taught in primary and secondary schools. But in London, although there is a thriving oral culture in the Yoruba speaking community, it is taken for granted that they can all speak English too. There is no provision at all within the education system for Yoruba-speaking school children. They can get teaching in English as an additional language, but no teaching of their own language, for, in strong contrast to the other nine languages in the top ten of *Multilingual Capital*, GCSE and A-level qualifications are not available for Yoruba. The Yoruba community is thus clearly at the receiving end of an 'English only' school system which exerts strong pressure on Yoruba speakers to shift towards English.

The difference between these two language communities raises the question what should be the basic

provision of language services and support that is necessary for any language in London. This question becomes even more pressing in the case of a language like Abua or Bisayan, where there are at most a very few speakers, of this language in London. As it is, speakers of such languages will have to rely on their own linguistic networks, resources and abilities, and the only option they have is to give up their native language and change over completely to English. This is what appears to be happening presently to the Maltese in London (Dench 2004). It is the common situation for very many immigrants speaking languages other than English, who are caught up in the social underbelly of the London economy, where they are slaving away in hotels and hospitals, in the cleaning and catering industry, in textile sweat shops and the taxi business, in the world of crime and prostitution – a violent underworld, which has been the subject of the hard hitting portrait in Stephen Frears' award-winning film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2001).

As we can see, different language communities are faced with very different situations and prospects. That is, we cannot just generalise across the many different language communities we find in London. What works for one language community may be harmful to another, and so policies should take into account what specific language community we are dealing with. For example, while the pressure to shift towards English may pose almost insurmountable obstacles for some pupils from some language communities, we note that for others it can offer great opportunities and the key to progress and achievement. One can think here of the unusual success rate at GCSE-exams (age 16) of Chinese and Indian children, who generally outperform their English peers (*The Guardian*, 5 March 2003). So why is it that these children rise so successfully to the challenge of English-language education? Is it because, from very early on, their parents have put extra value on a good education and are prepared to pay for it, or perhaps also because they have had a good grounding in learning skills first in their mother tongue? The only way to find out is by research and investigation, and by looking at the issue community-by-community, with due attention to the many cultural and socio-economic factors that are involved.

2.3. General observations

As we can see, it is possible to overcome the Census obstacle mentioned above by bringing these various kinds of data together from a wide range of very different sources and domains. The overall picture is that London is indeed 'the most cosmopolitan city in the world: 300

languages, 50 non-indigenous communities with populations of 10,000 or more, with virtually every race, culture and region able to claim at least a handful of Londoners' (*The Guardian*, Editorial, 21 January 2005).

From a sociolinguistic point of view, the London situation is marked by the symbiosis of, on the one hand, a large majority of monolingual speakers of the common and dominant language, English, and on the other, a very significant presence of about 30% of Londoners who are of foreign origin and between them speak at least 300 different languages. Similar trends in contemporary urban multilingualism have been reported for other large conurbations that act as magnets for migration, such as Barcelona, Paris, New York, Rome, Tokyo and the Netherlands, but the numbers reported for London, both of languages and of speakers, are very high indeed (cf. Extra & Yagmur 2004).

It is characteristic of London that it is a vast metropolis with a population of 14 million, and with many London-wide central operations, ranging from businesses, the metropolitan police and the transport system to the Greater London Authority and the mayor's office. At the same time, London is also a very decentralised collection of boroughs and villages, each fiercely local, with a lot of thriving small-scale enterprises and little cornershops that are often the hub of local activities. This combination of the global and the local, of enormous size and scale with little niche markets, provides an environment which – just as Randall found for botanical diversity – appears to actually foster, rather than threaten, the linguistic and cultural diversity in the capital.

But the key point here is that we should not generalise. The many different language communities we find in London today are not all the same. That is, we will need to make clear distinctions, and pay attention to differences in culture between the various communities, to differences in their socio-economic position, and to other factors affecting their linguistic vitality. For this, we will need a multidisciplinary approach, and the best way forward here is to develop a series of in-depth ethno-linguistic profiles, in which we go beyond mere numbers and focus on key factors such as health, literacy, economic achievement, religious and cultural organisation, intergenerational language transmission, contact with the home language community, social cohesion and educational achievement in the UK. In other words, what is urgently needed is a thorough update on the earlier surveys of immigrant language communities in the United Kingdom done by Stubbs (1985) and Alladina & Edwards (1991). This should give us the comprehensive, multi-dimensional profiles we need of the many different communities in London that speak languages other than English. It is only on such a

basis of painstaking research that we can work out a Vitality Index (in the sense of UNESCO's Declaration on Cultural Diversity and Intangible Heritage) for the languages of London.

3. Intercultural dynamics

Despite the fragmented state of London multilingualism research, the data presented above reveal the extent and pervasive presence of other languages alongside the common language, English. The next step now is to pursue a more qualitative line of inquiry, focusing on the intercultural dynamics accompanying this multilingualism. What does the presence of these languages and their speakers contribute to the multicultural society in London today?

3.1. Ongoing developments in the cultural field

As we can see, today 'hundreds of cultures co-exist, enrich and challenge each other' (McDowell 2003: vi, cf. McLeod 2004) in London, and in the contact between these cultures one can observe all kinds of interesting phenomena and processes – of fusion, eclecticism, cross-over and syncretism, but also of confrontation, friction and rejection. My sense is that, within the general field of intercultural communication, which has been characterized as 'fuzzy' (cf. Blommaert 1998), it is most productive to focus on these contact processes, which throw an interesting light on the cultural impact newcomers can have, through the merchandise they bring along, through the enormous diversity of their food, music, religions, values and behaviour; but also through their energy and activities, which make an immense contribution to the cultural domain – in film, theatre, literature, and in the many festivals and cultural celebrations that currently enrich the life of London.

For the survey of ongoing cultural developments that I want to present in this section, the website of *BBC London* offers a useful starting point, with detailed information about the cultural events and activities of some thirty London communities, ranging from Arabic, Brazilian and Ethiopian, through Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu and Jewish to Irish, Italian, Polish, Somali, Sikh and Turkish. But much the most comprehensive information is available on the website of *Global London*, where one can find 'almost everything ethnic and cultural in the multicultural capital'. This invaluable database, which has also been published in book form (Baker & Kim 2003), offers over 10,000 entries in 22 sections on

Accommodation, Arts & Culture, Associations, Bars & Nightclubs, Business, Education, Employment, Freight, Government, Health & Beauty, Legal, Media and Information, Motoring, Recreation, Restaurants, Shops, Translation, Travel and Welfare, for as many of the London language communities as the editors have been able to get hold of, ranging from Arabic, Chinese, German, Filipino and Hungarian, through Malaysian, Quechua, Romani and Thai, to Welsh, Yiddish and Zulu.

In our first domain, that of food and cuisine, the push and pull of desire and seduction have completely transformed the frugal Protestant diet of old into the contemporary abundance of consumerist hedonism. *Kebab, feta, couscous, pizza, paella* and *curries* are now common fare even in the supermarkets. New food stuffs are coming in from all over the world, such as *agar-agar, blinis, ginkgo nuts, okra, tempura* and *yams* (cf. Linford 1997). All over London there are restaurants, from Sri Lanka, Algeria, Morocco, the Punjab and Sweden. Japanese fastfood is a great success at *Wagamama*; one can have mussels and *frites* at Café Belgo; and great fortunes have been made by Chinese and Indian food entrepreneurs such as Noon Foods and the Pathak empire.

Next, in the domain of music one can find an incredible range of events listed on the London website of the BBC. In 2001 the Flemish theatre maker Alain Platel staged a multilingual choir event in the Camden Round House, involving some 18 London choirs, all singing in their own languages, among which Maori, Welsh, Russian and Georgian. In 2004, New Russian Culture arrived in London with a wide ranging programme of musical and theatrical events. Meanwhile, the Senegalese musicians Baaba Maal and Youssou N'Dour regularly bring their *World Music* to London audiences, making it a vital part of mainstream culture. London is also 'the creative hub of the worldwide market in Asian music'; and the modern Asian sound, made in Britain, mixes influences as diverse as R&B, bhangra and dancehall (*The Independent*, 17 October 2003). And Brian Eno believes that pop music has its origin in Arabic singing. All this testifies to the fusion and syncretism which are characteristic of the London music scene, where the composer Michael Nyman has embraced Chinese music, while his colleague Sir John Tavener (who in 1977 had converted to the Greek Orthodox religion) now takes his inspiration from Islam for a new choral work, to be premiered in Westminster Cathedral in 2006, in which the 99 names for God will be chanted in Arabic (*Independent on Sunday*, 17 October 2004).

Religious diversity is reflected in a calendar which today accommodates Ramadan (Islam), Diwali (Hindu), Chanuka (Jewish) as well as Vaisakhi (Sikh). The same British tradition of toleration and pragmatic accommodation that allows the Jews and Muslims to

have their own, religiously approved *kosher* and *halal* meat, is also behind the recent introduction by a number of banks of new types of loans and mortgages that satisfy Shariah principles against usury. Many other new religions - from Rastafarianism, Zoroastrian fire worship, Sufism and Taoism through to Voodoo, Celtic witchcraft and Shamanism - can now be found in London, and New Age and Paganism are growing fast (*The Daily Telegraph*, 13 December 2004; *Evening Standard*, 2 December 2003). Each of these brings along its own rituals, traditions and value systems, and may offer new identities and fulfillment to its followers. The Italian-American popstar Madonna has been reinventing herself in the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbalah, whereas Cat Stevens long ago converted to Islam and now runs a mosque and a school under his new name of Yusuf Islam.

The architectural impact of all these religions is considerable, for, in addition to its many churches and synagogues, London now boasts the largest mosques in Europe (in Regent's Park and in Morden (Achmadiyya)), as well as the biggest Sikh temple (Southall), the largest Hindu temple (Neasden) and a large Greek Orthodox cathedral (Camden). Such religious centres and places of worship often have a core function in the process of long-term language maintenance for the community concerned.

Meanwhile, in the London gay community there is the revival of the secret language Polari, an amalgam of Yiddish, Italian, Spanish, Occitan, Cant, Cockney rhyming slang and backslang, which was highly popular in the fifties and sixties, when it was made famous by the BBC Radio comedy *Round the Horne*. Today, this mixed language is being used again as a secret common lingo, for example in the Soho cabaret venue of Madame Jo Jo's (*The Independent on Sunday*, 12 December 2004, *The Guardian*, 17 January 2005; cf. Paul Baker 2002a, 2002b).

In the health sector we find many people looking for new cures and ways of healing, such as Ayurvedic medicine from India, Thai massage, Chinese acupuncture, the Turkish *hammam*, power-yoga and T'ai chi. In the hospitals the cultural dimension of patient care is being taken on board, with the NHS aiming to offer 'culturally appropriate services' for patients from the ethnic communities. The Ramadan, for example, offers a good opportunity for a campaign to try and persuade Muslims to quit smoking, not just for the month of fasting, but once and for all. In the case of genetic diseases such as sickle cell anaemia, which have been shown to be more prevalent amongst certain communities such as Greek Cypriots and the Congolese, medical action has been taken accordingly, including genetic screening and the dissemination of information in Greek and Lingala, respectively. In the field of psychiatry, a similar approach has been pioneered in the 1980s by

the Centre for Intercultural Therapy, *Nafsiyat*, established in 1983 by Jafar Kareem, which aims to provide psychotherapy and counseling services to members of cultural minority groups, using a range of languages including Arabic, Bengali, Farsi, Greek and Turkish (cf. Kareem & Littlewood 2000, Littlewood 1997). Along the same lines, the Central London Samaritans now operate a special telephone line, staffed by Japanese speaking volunteers, to support Japanese callers who are going through a crisis and need someone to talk to.

The most immediate contact between people of different cultures often occurs in the domain of sport, where physical contact and competition are counterbalanced, in principle, by the rules of fair play and sportsmanship. The major football clubs of London such as Chelsea and Arsenal could not survive without foreign players, coaches and owners. And every Saturday morning on the Hackney marshes in East London one can see the United Nations of London in action, with an Arab football team playing the Caribbeans, the Albanians against the UK Urban Mix, and the British Asians meeting a white local Cockney team (*The Guardian*, 21 May 2004).

In the education sector, finally, we find that when schools take the teaching and learning of community languages seriously, and do not see immigrant children only in terms of 'needing better English', they report improved exam results for their pupils also within the English-language curriculum. White Hart Lane school in Tottenham, with pupils who between them speak 58 different languages, saw a threefold improvement in exam results when some science lessons were taught in Turkish ('because that makes it easier to convey "conceptual" aspects'), and children whose first language is not English were encouraged to take GCSEs in their native language (*Evening Standard*, 20 April 2005). In primary schools in Hackney, children learn to read in three languages – English, Gujarati and Urdu – from the age of six, and, as Dr Raymonde Sneddon has shown, by the age of 11 these 'trilingual pupils are doing better at school than their monolingual peers' (*The Independent*, 9 October 2003). A further study by Dr Charmian Kenner, of bilingual children living in London and learning to write in both English and either Chinese, Arabic or Spanish, showed how comfortably these children move from one language and script to the other - 'not only can children cope well with early biliteracy, it offers cognitive gain' (Kenner 2003). These findings are in line with what is known more generally about the benefits of bilingualism and bilingual education (Baker 2000, Baker & Prys Jones 1998). They also show us the way forward (cf. McPake 2006), which is to respect and foster, rather than waste, the extremely valuable linguistic talents and resources

available right here in London, viz. the presence of so many people who can speak so many of the world's living languages - and know English too.

3.2. Contestation and representation

All this is not to say that the presence and use of languages other than English is uncontested. For it clearly is, according to the studies of Baumann (1996) and Dench et al (2006). That is, in contrast to the many impressive examples given above of intercultural contact, cooperation and interaction in the domains of food, music, religion, health, fashion, sport, film, TV, literature, theatre and education, we note that the contemporary multicultural society also has its discontents and tensions, its clashes and confrontations.

On the bottom rung of the economy, for example, there is the terrible world of immigrant exploitation and slavery, run by violent gangmasters, people smugglers and prostitution rackets. To gain entry into British society, many immigrants will have to pass through this criminal sector. One hears of fake passports as well as of counterfeit spices. Sham marriages occur too, as does the newest type of crime, identity theft. In the courts, furthermore, one comes across cases of so-called 'honour killings', race hate crime, voodoo sacrifices, genital mutilation and other new crimes that mark the clash of cultures.

In addition there are the symbolic, and at times not so symbolic, confrontations between communities and religions, for example over women's rights, the Islamic veil and arranged marriages. Religious communities may be the target of attacks; anti-semitic violence is on the rise, and Hindus and Sikhs are at loggerheads with Muslims over their attempts at proselytising. In other cases it is as if neighbouring communities are living a parallel existence on different planets, witness the alienation experienced by many muslim immigrants. Distance and ignorance, indifference, violence, discrimination, racism and 'hate crime' are persistent concerns of the New Labour government, which has set much store by its attempt to introduce a new offence of 'incitement to religious hatred'.

The political context here is the ongoing debate about immigration. In recent years, leading politicians such as Michael Howard, David Cameron and David Blunkett have demanded that immigrants should learn to speak proper English and pass a test in British cultural knowledge. Tory education spokesman David Willetts has recently attacked the teaching of languages other than English as 'an extreme form of multiculturalism' and

suggested that, instead, we should get immigrant children 'speaking English as fast as possible as young as possible' (*Evening Standard*, 9 October 2006). Demands such as these are part of a wider debate in the UK about the burdens and benefits of immigration, about multiculturalism and the duties of citizens, about limiting cultural diversity and stimulating integration, and also about the national identity of the English and the British themselves.

To some extent, such political debates are the inevitable accompaniment of the frictions and discontents in contemporary society. For, as *The Guardian* observed, 'Never have so many different kinds of people tried living together in the same place before. What some people see as the great experiment of multiculturalism will triumph or fail here' (*The Guardian*, 5 February 2005). But at the same time, the presence of so many newcomers also testifies to the immense openness of the British capital as a city of immigration (cf. *The Economist* 2003, Jenkins 2003). The arts sector in London, for example, attracts creative people from all over the world: the National Opera has an Italian director, the Institute of Contemporary Art is led by Ekow Eshun from Ghana, the artist Tracey Emin is of Turkish descent, the Italian sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi has made major contributions to the landscape of London, the Fleming Jan Debbaut was until recently curator of the Tate Modern, and one of the BBC's leading TV reporters is the Somali Rageh Omar.

The same openness is characteristic too of what I have called the London approach to linguistic diversity, which stands out by its pragmatic common sense, its recognition of the vital importance of effective communication, information and translation, and its development of language management practices, policies and services that work (cf. Salverda 2002, 2003). History has played a large part in this. Pragmatism and a realistic acceptance of cultural diversity are important legacies of the British Empire. And immigration has been a fact of life and a vital factor in the life of London for many centuries now, as can be seen in the little Museum of Immigration in Spitalfields, which started life as a Huguenot refugee church, then later became a synagogue, and now houses a Bangladeshi Cultural Centre – and, as such, is an interesting example of how identity and change intermingle in the domain of migration (cf. Winder 2004).

But people do take different views of these developments. Josie Appleton, for example, has sketched out two scenarios for the future of social and cultural diversity in London, which present us with a clear and important choice. One is her nightmare scenario, of increasing bureaucratic regulation and patrolling of the boundaries of toleration, of general indifference,

increasing apartheid and ghetto formation, all in the name of cultural diversity. In her other scenario she hopes for a renaissance of public life, with new cross-border alliances and critical exchanges between people from different communities, and cultural movements based not on where people come from, but on where they want to go – in art, in politics, and in life (Appleton 2001).

There is thus a range of different trends and tensions in the intercultural contact that is such a striking and pervasive characteristic of London today. London is teeming with cultural and linguistic diversity, due to a large influx of new people, with new languages, new ideas and new cultures. The various intercultural contact processes which we have surveyed above make a strong contribution to a richer, more dynamic and livelier climate in the multicultural society of today.

4. The literatures of London

4.1. The representation of linguistic and cultural diversity

London's current cultural diversity has also found artistic expression and representation. Over the past seven years, for example, 'cultural diversity' has been consciously promoted by the great cultural institutions such as the British Council and the BBC. Twice a week the BBC World Service's radio soap *Westway*, set in a fictional version of Hammersmith in West London, was broadcast to a worldwide audience of some 16 million listeners, in a series that has been running since 1996 but was discontinued in 2005, even though it was more popular than *Coronation Street*. As the scriptwriter Jonathan Myerson recently put it: 'London is the world's most multicultural city, and our characters can and do represent almost every race and religion, and it was through them, through their stories, that we explored that most vital truth of all – the one that's created by fiction' (*The Independent*, 4 April 2005).

The same goes for film. There is the highly entertaining and wildly successful film *Bend it like Beckham* (2000) by Gurinder Chadha, which shows the interaction of an English and an Indian girl playing and competing in the same football team. But equally, there is the hardhitting portrait of immigrant life in the London underworld in Stephen Frears' award-winning film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2001).

The theatre too, in the country of Shakespeare, offers a forum for addressing the issues and frictions of the multicultural society of today, witness recent explorations of Shakespeare and Islam, of Shakespeare and Sufism, of Shakespeare and the Jews, of Shakespeare

and the Blacks. Contemporary intercultural theatre has much to offer too. It can be entertaining, as we can see in the popular Indian TV soap *The Kumars at No 42*, or the theatrical adaptation of Salman Rushdie's *Haroun or the Sea of Stories*. But it can also be confrontational. In 2004, for example, the award-winning Chinese theatre group Yellow Earth put on a play, entitled *58*, about the 58 Chinese immigrants who suffocated and died in a Dutch container lorry on their way to Dover while being smuggled into England in June 2000. The point of this play was, according to its director, David Tse, 'to remind people of their humanity' (*The Independent*, 27 September 2004).

4.2. Literatures in languages other than English

Within this context of cultural dynamism, literature, especially the literature of immigration, is making a major contribution to the multicultural society today, by articulating an understanding both of our common and shared humanity and of our many-faceted cultural differences. This becomes clear when we survey the wide range of diasporic literatures that one can find in London today, written and produced by immigrants, both in English and in many other languages.

To begin with the literatures in other languages, London today boasts a large number of printing presses, audiovisual media, journals, magazines and newspapers using languages such as Albanian, French, German, Greek, Gujarati, Italian, Japanese, Korean Polish, Russian, Turkish and Urdu. London has a daily Chinese newspaper, *Sing Tao*; a daily Polish newspaper *Dziennik Polski*; two in Italian, *London Sera*, and *La voce sera* (cf. McAuley 1993); and from the early 1970s onwards, when the Djeddah newspaper *Asharq-al-assat* first began to be published here, London has become a major centre of Arabic publishing.

There is thus a solid base for the literary life of those languages. Cultural associations and institutions, bookshops and libraries regularly organise literary, musical and poetry evenings in languages other than English. Quite a lot of these events are in the domain of oral culture. In February 2005, for example, the fairytales of Hans Christian Andersen were retold in Creole at the South Bank Festival of Children's Literature by the Caribbean storyteller Jan Blake. In April 2005 the Pushkin Club presented the Russian poet of the sixties, Leonid Arontzon. In addition, quite a few London poets today are writing in English just as much as in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil and Urdu – which are all major languages, spoken by many millions of native speakers all round the world, and with longstanding, rich

and vital literary traditions. As a result, these London poets have at their disposal a large cultural heritage from the Indian subcontinent, and they celebrate this in their work, whether it is to speak of the Bengali poet Tagore, the god Shiva or the Taj Mahal, or perhaps of arranged marriages and the double colonization of women (cf. Chatterjee 2000). Last year, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in Bloomsbury ran the *Chinese Literature in the City*, programme, where Chinese writers living and working in London, such as Ma Jian, Hu Dong, Yo Yo and Xinran, regularly offered readings, performances and discussions reflecting the fact that London today is also one of the major centres of Chinese literature outside China.

We have to do here with diasporas that each have their own language, culture, traditions and literature. And through the efforts of so many writers and poets who continue to write and chant in their own languages, those immigrant communities continue to reproduce and renew their cultures of origin. We are reminded here of twentieth-century German *Exil*-literature and a writer like Elias Canetti (Nobel Prize for Literature 1981) who wrote a large part of his *oeuvre* in German in Hampstead in North London, witness his posthumous *Die englischen Jahre* (2003; English translation *Party in the Blitz*, 2005). Spanish speaking exiles have also been welcome over the centuries (cf. Decho et al 1998). The Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante came to London as an exile in the 1960s and died here in February 2005, but from his London base he always continued to make significant contributions to Spanish literature, such as *Tres Tristes Tigres* (1967) and *Mea Cuba* (1982). He was awarded the Cervantes Prize in 1997.

In London today there are many other such literary exiles. The *Exiled Writers Ink* website was established in 2000 for writers arriving in London without English, from many different countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chile, China, Iran, Israel, Kurdistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Syria and Uganda. A very interesting example is that of two young women poets, Negar Hasan-Zadeh and Ziba Karbassi, one from Iran hence writing in Persian, the other from the former USSR and writing in Russian, who met, far away from home, in London in September 2003 in the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) for an evening of poetry in the mother tongue they both spoke, Azeri, which had always been forbidden and repressed in the countries where they were born.

In London, where these exiled writers are free to use their native languages, they will always be in close and intimate contact with the English language too, and this may stimulate all kinds of linguistic experimentation and innovation, as we know from the case of Vladimir Nabokov and other great exiled modernists such as

James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Cabrera Infante. These influences all come together in the great multilingual experiment of the Spanish writer Julian Ríos, whose babylonian *Larva – A Midsummer Night's Babel* (1983), a novel both set and written in London, is full of the most complex language games, literary puns and allusions, a multilingual labyrinth of words as intricate as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

4.3. Literature in English

When we now turn towards what newcomers have written in English, we must note first of all that – even if London is also a world centre for publishing in Arabic, Chinese and Spanish – English-language literature continues to be the dominant literary system. Exiled writers do write in this dominant language too, and may find a ready audience for novels and poetry set in their lost homelands, whether this is the Kurdish part of Iran, as in Gohar Kordi's *An Iranian Odyssey* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1991) and *Mabi's Story* (London: Women's Press, 1995); or Nigeria, as in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (London: Arris Books, 2005); or Pakistan, as in Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005). Similarly, the Iranian-born singer, songwriter and author Shusha Guppy recently published her *The Secret of Laughter: Magical Tales from Classical Persia* (2005).

Leaving aside translations into English (cf. www.babelguide.co.uk), I will focus here in particular on the fact that – just as in film and theatre – the multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural London that we are studying here has also found a literary representation in English.

As long ago as 1987, for example, Doris Lessing published her story 'In Defence of the Underground', in which she describes the great diversity of people she meets during a day trip on the London underground. Her description evokes the immense diversity of her fellow travellers – white, black, brown, yellow, men, women, Japanese, Indians, French, Americans, Arabs, Danish and English. Nevertheless, even though she notes the polyglot character of the London she travels through, the reader never once gets to hear what those newcomers have to say. They remain 'other people', without a voice; their presence is observed and recorded – they are, in effect, seen but not heard.

Today, this has completely changed. Almost twenty years after Lessing's story, the portrait of multicultural London given by Zadie Smith in her literary debut, the novel *White Teeth* (2000), and again in her *The Autograph Man* (2002), is teeming with voices, and noises, with words borrowed from other languages, Creole

expressions, new accents and mixed lingo's. Her novels were published 'at the end of a busy decade of postcolonial London representations by such writers as Andrea Levy, Diran Adebayo, Bernardine Evaristo, Ferdinand Dennis, Atima Srivastava, Meera Syal, Alex Wheatle, Benjamin Zephaniah and others' (McLeod 2004:162). Other names that spring to mind are those of Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi and Harry Kunzru, whose novel *The Impressionist* (2002) is a story of identity change.

The arrival of these new voices has been marked by the award of literary prizes. In April 2005, the new Decibel Prize for writers of African, Caribbean or Asian descent was awarded to Hari Kunzru for his second novel, *Transmission* (2004). He was chosen from a shortlist including the Rastafarian poet Benjamin Zephaniah's *Gangsta Rap*, the children's writer Malorie Blackman's *Knife Edge*, and the Caribbean novelist Andrea Levy, whose London-West Indian migrant story *Small Island* had already won the Orange Prize, the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize. In October 2004, Dajit Nagra won the Forward poetry prize for his *Look We Have Coming to Dover!*, a poem about the immigrant experience of his Punjabi parents, who came to Britain in the 1960s. In January 2005, George Szirtes, born in Hungary in 1948 and exiled to Britain at the age of eight, won the T.S. Eliot poetry award for his collection *Reel*, "a brilliantly virtuosic collection of deeply felt poems concerned with the personal impact of the dislocations and betrayals of history", as the jury wrote. And in April 2005, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* by Marina Lewycka, herself of Ukrainian descent, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize 2005.

It is important to note here that the conditions for the success of these writers have also been put into place by immigrants, in particular the many mid-century exiles and immigrants from continental Europe who have made a crucial contribution to the English-language publishing industry in London. Publishing houses like Thames & Hudson, Weidenfeld, Secker & Warburg have transformed the literary and cultural life of Britain after the war (cf. Snowman 2002). In particular, we should mention here a publisher like Tom Maschler, himself an Austrian/Jewish refugee, the inventor of the Booker Prize, who has discovered a good number of the most famous writers in the world today, including Salman Rushdie.

And just as the publishing industry has been transformed by immigrants, so too has English literature, through the contribution of the new writers mentioned above, who have found their own voice, in stories and poetry, and have made their mark in English literature. As the novelist Michael Moorcock commented in 2003:

'Constantly invigorated by successive waves of immigrants, London produces a literature unrivalled by any other great city; she's a powerhouse of fiction, using whole cultures for fuel' (*The Guardian Review*, 27 September 2003).

5. The literature of immigration

5.1. The novel of immigration

Within this English-language literary production it is worth taking a closer look at London novels written by immigrants over the past half-century. In this category we have novels such as *Future to let* (1958) by the Polish writer Jerzy Peterkiewicz, *I Shall Die on the Carpet* (1966) by the Italian Peppino Leoni (cf. McAuley 1993), and recently *London Irish* (2002) by Zane Radcliffe.

An early and important contribution to the genre was made by the so-called Windrush generation of Black and Asian immigrants from the Caribbean: George Lamming wrote *The Emigrants* (1954) and the Trinidadian Sam Selvon *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Since then we have had many others such as *Second Class Citizen* (1974) by the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta, and the recent success of *Small Island* (2004), Andrea Levy's tale of postwar immigration from Jamaica. All stand in an immigrant tradition that has recently been described in Sukhdev Sandhu's monograph *London Calling. How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (2003) and in John McLeod's *Postcolonial London* (2004).

The life of Chinese immigrants has been the subject of Timothy Mo's novel *Sour Sweet* (1982). More recently, Xinran, the Chinese columnist of *The Guardian*, has been reflecting on her experiences in the Chinese diaspora in London. For Arabic authors writing in English there is the magazine and website *Banipal*. Important anthologies are *Extravagant Strangers* (1997), edited by Caryl Phillips, which presents a long tradition of immigrant writing in London, starting as early as 1770; and *Diaspora City* (2003), edited by Nick McDowell, which presents new writing by immigrants from Nigeria, the Gambia, Southeast Europe, Cyprus, South Africa and Albania, living and working in London today. And already some critics are looking forward to "the first Somali London novel, the first Kosovan London novel" (Jeremy Gavron, in *Evening Standard*, 30 June 2003).

On the basis of these and other immigration novels we may establish a typology of this realist genre, which, starting from the life experience of immigrants, goes on to give literary form and expression to it. Migration is a trajectory, at each stage of which emotions and imaginations are put to the test, and in the course of which newcomers experience a cultural transformation

that often includes an existential remix of values new and old. This process can be pretty brutal. It can change ordinary human beings into exiles in London, into asylum seekers, illegal aliens or even undesirables. But the process can also bring unexpected opportunities, transforming simple people from faraway, backward villages into fashionable cosmopolites; poor immigrants into successful athletes and entrepreneurs; or illiterate young women into doctors, teachers and writers. The journey is never simple, and the immigrant will have to be able or learn how to handle not only culture shock but also the challenges and opportunities that await him or her in London. The process eventually produces new Londoners, with transformed and mixed identities, who make a very important contribution not just to the society and economy of London, but also to its culture.

In these novels of immigration – just as in Zadie Smith's writing – one can hear the echoes of the multilingualism we described earlier. The Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta, for example, may be best known for her novels in English, but English is only her fourth language, after Igbo, Yoruba and Agay (McLeod 2004: 101). The same kind of multilingualism can be found in *Rodinsky's Room* (1999), a reconstruction by Rachel Lichtenstein and Ian Sinclair of the life of a multilingual Jew, a Kabbalist and mystic seeker obsessed by languages, who simply vanished into the East End of London. As Nicholas Lezard put it, the 'non-dit' of this man is 'the counterpart, in real life, of *La Disparition* by Georges Perec' (*The Guardian*, 18 March 2000). Rodinsky's life is also the biographical counterpart to the multilingual fictions of Julian Ríos's *Larva*, the labyrinthine novel of London mentioned above.

5.2. *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali

The best known of these London immigration novels is *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali. But she is certainly not the only writer active in this genre. In 1987 she was preceded by Rahila Khan (alias the reverend Toby Forward), with *Down the Road, Worlds Away*, a collection of stories about the lives and experiences of Asian women in England. Then in 2003, Tony White published his novel *Foxy-T*, also situated in the Bengali East End, or 'Bangla Town' as it was baptized by Salman Rushdie. Further new additions to this East End immigration genre are Jeremy Gavron's historical novel *An Acre of Barren Ground; Or, the History of Everyone Who Ever Lived in Brick Lane* (2005), and Tarquin Hall's journalistic *Salaam Brick Lane. A year in the new East End* (2005). But there is an older genre right underneath, which relates to the traditional white working class living in the East End

before it became 'Banglatown'. They are the subject of an epic saga in ten historical novels by Sally Worboyes. The most recent of these, *Girl from Brick Lane* (2002), is set in the early decades of the 20th century, while in her *Down Stepney Way* (1999) the Blackshirts of the British fascist Mosley are marching through the turbulent Jewish East End of the thirties to molest and attack the Jewish community then living there.

Brick Lane is a realist and satirical novel, which has triggered very different reactions. On the one hand, the Bengali community in the East End sees it as an insult, a negative portrait in which their community is presented as backwards and of limited education. Bernard Crick on the other hand, the New Labour government's adviser on the civil society and citizenship, sees in Monica Ali "an Anglo-Bangladeshi Dickens: broad humour, grounded in unexpected, detailed and humane observation of the lives of poor immigrants in a precise London location." Crick has also emphasised its eye-opening power, noting that "*Brick Lane* helps the immigrant cause more than a dozen guilt-stirring polemics." (*Guardian Review*, 6 December 2003).

It is interesting to see that the publication of this novel was accompanied by a critical vocabulary containing terms such as 'authenticity', 'true' and 'insult', which all refer to the relation between a literary representation and its underlying reality of life in the real world. As Sukdev Sandhu has commented, critics now invite the residents of the real Brick Lane to confirm or deny the authenticity of this novel, whereas, in the case of Martin Amis and his novel *London Fields* (1989), they would never have asked that question of the residents of Notting Hill (*London Review of Books*, 9 October 2003).

Thus, *Brick Lane* is read more as reportage and documentary than as fiction. But when we do read this novel in conjunction with the life of the immigrant community in the Bengali East End, it becomes possible to note something that is missing, viz. the fact that in the Bengali community of London there actually is an active cultural and literary life going on. Along the same line we may note that the principal character of the novel, Chanu, the man who cherishes this literary tradition and dreams of establishing a Bengali library in the area, is made the object of ridicule by the female narrator.

Now, instead of saying – as the authenticist discourse mentioned above would have it – that this novel is therefore 'false' (because of the effective existence of a Bengali literary tradition in the East End), or 'full of stereotypes' (because, in fact, not all Bengalis are illiterate peasants or ineffective dreamers), it is more interesting, in my view, to see this episode in the novel *Brick Lane* from a postcolonial point of view as a battle of conflicting cultural values, in which the absence of respect for and the ignorance of Bengali literary

traditions (which, after all, can boast the Nobel prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore) and the ridicule meted out to the literary dreams of the Chanu character correspond directly with their counterpart, viz. the emancipation of the woman who embraces the new opportunities she discovers in London, and who makes herself heard as the narrator of this English-language novel.

In this way, *Brick Lane* takes part in the complicated and unequal exchange that its narrator has to negotiate, of one set of values linked to the traditions and male-dominated culture of origin, against another set of new London values, specifically liberty, individualism and the opportunity to develop herself.

This opposition and the concomitant exchange are not exclusive to the Bengali community, however. In other immigrant communities – the Polish, the Gujaratis, the Italians and the Portuguese, for example – participation in ethnic, religious, social and cultural organisations has also been found to be low (at most 20%), and those who actively try to preserve their culture of origin are usually almost all male (Stubbs 1985: 209-210). Thus, precisely when the narrator of *Brick Lane* mocks her husband Chanu and turns to the new values that London invites her to embrace, we hear the voice of an immigrant woman who is actively seeking a new identity, and is willing to pay the cultural price of this transaction.

And it is this voice that has made itself heard. In 2004, John Updike, for example, commented that 'the British novel has been saved by the ethnic minorities', adding 'After the return of the Empire to Great Britain, you have gained many different voices' (*The Guardian*, 31 May 2004). The point was reinforced by Lady Antonia Fraser, who answered the question 'What is Britain's biggest triumph?' by stating 'It's literature because it regularly renews itself with incomers. Salman Rushdie, whose work I admire very much, is probably the most famous, but there are younger writers like Monica Ali (I loved *Brick Lane*)' (*The Independent*, 2 February 2005).

6. Identity and metamorphosis – the perspective of Amin Maalouf

In this London polyphony of diasporic literatures, one of the central themes is that of identity. For a discussion of this theme we can align ourselves with the inspirational ideas and views of the writer Amin Maalouf and his essay *Les Identités meurtrières* (1998), in which he offers us two

key considerations for an approach to this central issue.

First of all, Maalouf notes that in the globalised world of today, marked as it is by mass migrations, the old notions of identity - monolithic, unique, nationalist, fundamentalist and exclusive – are no longer sufficient. The humanist remedy he suggests is that we must learn languages in order to be able to acquire more than one single culture or identity only. In this way we can develop a sense of cultural identity that is flexible and plural. Similar ideas have been developed by Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in her book *Who do we think we are?* (2000), where she takes the view that integration demands adaptation from both sides, and advocates an acceptance, however difficult this may be, of multiple identities.

Secondly, we note that according to Maalouf it is literature that opens up a space for trying out and experimenting with new identities. And in fact, in the literatures of London that I have surveyed above, we can find all sorts of identities caught right in the middle of a trajectory of migrant metamorphosis. Whether these authors are writing in English or in other languages, the key fact is that the novel of immigration offers a literary exploration of their formative experiences and their changing identities. Thus, for example, Chinese identity can reproduce itself in the Chinese-language literature produced here in London, but can equally articulate itself in English, in a novel like Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet*.

Here, again, we find important transformations going on: an immigrant from far away can become a writer in London, and his or her daily toil may be transformed into literature. And the presence of so many writers, from so many parts of the world and writing in so many different languages, with their different imaginations, their new literary forms and expressions, has already begun and will continue to transform the literary and cultural life of London.

7. Concluding remarks

The central aim of the survey that I have just presented – and which, of necessity, is incomplete – has been to explore contemporary literary life in London. As we have seen, this constitutes a veritable Tower of Babel, with many different floors, balconies, salons, and extensions. The literatures of London constitute a vast conglomerate of little niche markets within an enormous polyglot bazaar full of novels, stories, texts, poetries, publications and literary festivals. This outcome of our survey stands in strong contrast to the completely monolingual portrait given by Anna Quindén in her recent *Imagined London*

(2004), where even Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* only gets a fleeting reference towards the end of the book.

The literary diversity which I have outlined above takes its place in the larger context of contemporary London culture and cultural diversity, with its immense range of languages, religions, musics and theatres, of ethnic, racial, religious and language communities, of cultural conventions and traditions. In this context, the literatures of London make an important cultural contribution. For, just as the musicians have contributed their *World Music* to mainstream culture, so the writers have made themselves heard and have marked their entry into the literary system of London with their new voices and sensibilities, their different views and perceptions of the world. In the process, they have added new dimensions of meaning and imagination to English-language literature.

In addition, as Bernard Crick put it, their novels may also serve a social purpose, viz. to inform, through their fictions, the Londoners who are living here already about those newcomers who have come to stay. Even if one wanted to dispute the authenticity of those fictions, this informative function makes an invaluable contribution in a society where many of those newcomers are habitually regarded as 'strangers' and 'different'. When this kind of stereotype is well established and widespread – as it is in London – , then there certainly is merit in showing, in the realist manner of the Dickensian tradition, to what extent those 'others' actually are human beings like ourselves.

This, then, finally, is the moral aspect of those many literatures we encounter in London today. They remind us of the common humanity which immigrants share with us.

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