

Contemporary Fiction: Narrative and Image in Multi-cultural Britain

ENG 379/579
Summer 2008
Bath, U.K.
URI in England Summer Program

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Britain is oft imagined as a nation of great age and remarkable homogeneity, a land of tradition, hierarchy, rigid social codes, and precise rituals. Yet, since the end of World War II, Britain has been greatly transformed by an influx of immigrants, many from countries once part of the British Empire. These changes altered the image of Britain with ramifications still in play and debate today. ENG 379 will survey a variety of fiction and film works charting this remapping. As we explore these texts, we will examine how these works find culture to be not an essence that might be lost but rather a product of difference. Consequently, we will examine thematics of exchange, translation, and hybridity. These motifs all point to a remapping of Britain, one that now puts new stress and significance on city/country tensions. We will also take a look at how these themes impact modes of storytelling in both fiction and film, how narrative and image now work otherwise. We will also take a look at how such novels and films rework nostalgic narratives of British identity.

Britain today is a modern and multi-cultural nation, one largely urban—a fact in contradiction with lingering stereotypes about a pastoral England whose life revolves around country houses, afternoon tea, and dinner dress. As this stereotype indicates, one of the key elements at stake in remapping identity is negotiating the image. Mosques, chicken tikka, and ska are not necessarily the first things that pop into mind when you think of Britain—and yet all these things are very much part of the contemporary nation. As Salman Rushdie has noted, the problem with the British is “that their history happened overseas and they don’t know what it means.” This class will examine what happens when that history returns in the form of immigrants. We will thus think through how articulations of identity—individual, community, and national—make use of narrative and image. We will also interrogate how narrative and image might be at odds and what might be the consequences for a sense of self.

Class books

Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*
Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*
Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge*
Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*
Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*

Methods

Our methods will consist of interactive and guided discussion as the primary means of sketching out our terrain. This means that coming to class prepared and being willing and able to discuss assigned texts will be essential. To help ensure we keep on track, I reserve the right to give quizzes should informed discussion droop. These quizzes would form part of the participation part of the grading program. So keep up and keep talking in our chats—the life you save could be your own.

We will also make frequent use of group work and informal presentations as way of helping us move through a variety of themes and topics.

Class Grade

- Short paper (5-7 pages): 25%
- Final paper (8-10 pages): 40%
- Class Participation: 20%
- Take-home Final Exam 15%

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

WEEK ONE:

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6 July, 12:00 p.m. 6:00 p.m.	Orientation on the Green; Getting to Know Bath Opening Banquet at the Slug and Lettuce
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7 July, 9:00-10:15 1:30	Introductions: Course pack readings Local Tour: Bath Sights
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8 July, 9:00-10:15 1:30	<i>The Lonely Londoners</i> Local Tour: Roman Baths and Costume Museum
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9 July, 9:00-10:15	<i>The Satanic Verses</i>
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10 July, 7:30 a.m.	Coach trip: Avebury, Stonehenge, and Salisbury Cathedral
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11 July, 9:00-12:00	<i>The Satanic Verses</i>
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12-13 July,	Weekend Free for Travel
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WEEK TWO:

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14 July, 9:00-10:15 7:30 p.m.	<i>The Satanic Verses</i> Theatre Royal, Bath
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15 July, 9:00-10:15 1:00 p.m.	<i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> Local Trip: Prior Park
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16 July, 9:00-10:15 2:00 p.m.	<i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> Local Tour: Lacock
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17 July, 7:30 a.m. Pit Coal Mine	Coach trip: Tintern Abbey, Chepstow Castle, and the Big
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18-20 July	No Class on Friday: Long Weekend for Travel
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WEEK THREE:	
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21 July, 9:00-10:15 1:00-3:00	<i>Cambridge</i> Office Hours
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22 July, 9:00-10:15 1:00 p.m.	<i>Brick Lane</i> Coach Trip: Stourhead Gardens
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23 July, 9:00-10:15	<i>Brick Lane</i>
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24 July, 8:00 a.m. Temple Meads, and other sights	Coach Trip to Bristol: Museum of the British Empire,
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25 July, 9:00-10:15 6:00 p.m.	<i>Brick Lane</i> Closing Banquet at the Slug and Lettuce
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26 July, Saturday	Depart for Home!