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## Anxious Asian men: 'coming out' into neoliberal masculinity

### **Abstract**

The last decade and a half has seen the emergence of a series of novels and memoirs exploring the fraught identities of British Asian men. In this article, I will situate the emergence of these texts in the context of interest in South Asian masculinity, and suggest ways in which these texts intervene in larger conversations, in particular regarding the War on Terror, which theorists such as Jasbir Puar have identified as imbricated in the LGBT rights paradigm. I offer readings of two memoirs, showing their reliance on the metaphor of the closet, to suggest that this use of “coming out” as a structuring device produces and is produced by a retrenchment of conservative ideas about South Asian family structures, arranged marriage, and “tradition”. Finally, I reflect on the significance of this argument at a time in which the neocolonial structures of the global War on Terror are becoming increasingly virulent.

**Key Words:** British Asian, homonormativity, masculinity, sexuality, War on Terror

*I know that at times you are grappling with huge issues over your identity, neither feeling a part of the British mainstream nor a part of the culture from your parents' background.*

David Cameron, 'Extremism' speech, Ninestiles School, Birmingham, 20 July 2015

### **Introduction**

The War on Terror is a complex, dispersed and uneven global project, which shifts shape across national boundaries, and comprises varied institutions and mechanisms, from corporate surveillance to drone strikes to political speeches. Mahmood Mamdani (2007) notes that the “clash of civilisations”(in Samuel Huntingdon's formulation) can be seen as the

“ideological arm” of this so-called war. Following Mamdani, I propose that one of the unified elements in the “clash of civilisations” discourse is in its understanding of culture as the battlefield. It is within culture that sexuality becomes a key site of contestation, racialisation and ideological power. My analysis develops Joseph Massad (2015), Gargi Bhattacharyya (2008) and Jasbir Puar’s (2007) critiques of sexuality as a central element of global security in a new age of empire. The focus on sexuality brings certain figures to the fore: the veiled Muslim woman; the sexually dysfunctional terrorist; and the patriotic, cosmopolitan gay man, to give just three examples.<sup>1</sup> Across these different figures and configurations, sexual orientation is seen to be a foundational characteristic of the self, the repression of which is dangerous, violent and uncivilised. Within Britain, this discourse has placed attention squarely on communities that are seen to inhabit uniquely sexually repressive cultures. In particular, South Asians are singled out for concern. Though the weight of this concern is, of course, most heavily brought to bear on Muslims, Sikh and Hindu communities have also historically been viewed in similar terms, and continue to be brought into the orbit of surveillance, fascination, and discussion, sometimes as counterpoints to and sometimes as continuous with their Muslim peers.

Since the early 2000s, we have seen the emergence of a series of novels and memoirs that both illustrate and enact aspects of the distinct, troubling and complex role played by British Asian men in public life as the War on Terror “transform[s] the terms of civilian life” (Bhattacharyya: 2008, 35). The texts themselves sometimes take a satirical swipe at this public fascination, for example in Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal’s 2006 novel *Tourism*, the narrator quips ‘Identity was a hot topic in today’s society’ (158). These texts have been published at a time when young British Asian men are a “minority” of particular interest, as the figure of the “homegrown terrorist” looms large in the national psyche – particularly since the 7/7

bombings – as the example of cultural difference *par excellence*. These texts all rely on the “identity crisis” or “double life” trope that was central to early diasporic postcolonial literature and which has been strongly critiqued,<sup>2</sup> though continues to circulate as common sense, as per the epigraphic quotation from David Cameron’s speech.

Within this emerging literary field, texts broadly fit into two genres. The first are novels – by Gautam Malkani (2006), Sunjeev Sahota (2011), and Tony White (2003) among others – in which narratives of macho cultural pride take centre stage, with a focus on “new” British Asian masculinities that are syncretic (particularly borrowing from hip hop) and posit a vision of religious and cultural identity as a source of strength, power, and virility. The second genre, which I dub stories of “Anxious Asian men”, comprises both memoirs and autobiographical novels. These texts follow a young man’s journey to assimilation, codified as sexual normativity defined by love marriage, in opposition to family and tradition, which is assumed to crystallise in arranged marriage. Despite the significant changes to how many marriages are arranged in British Asian communities, as research by Fauzia Ahmad (2012) and others explore, these texts retain a deep investment in the “love” versus “arranged” opposition as a stable one.

These texts gather significance partially from their volume and similarity; the fact of their publication in the last fifteen years underscores that there is a market for stories of British Asian masculinity and, perhaps more importantly, that this particular narrative of assimilation and sexual normativity is one with a long and significant life. Further, despite the seemingly upbeat formula that subtends these narratives of individual self-fashioning, they are fraught with anxiety about the “truth” of identity, operating through the “culture clash” narrative to which some of the now-repudiated but highly influential research on

“extremism” refers.<sup>3</sup> As such, crucial to their agenda is distancing themselves from the violent subjectivities projected by the War on Terror’s culturalist logic. Their desire for freedom, narrowly but powerfully defined as romantic love, is an attempt to disavow the complex demands of family, thus the persistence of the familial – especially as the conduit for “culture” – is a source of perpetual anxiety.

In this article I will focus on memoirs, as the cultural centrality of life-writing has deepened in late capitalism, particular as new forms of life-writing proliferate online.<sup>4</sup> These texts can be seen as a means of claiming new narrative space, drawing on the “misery memoir” genre that gained prominence in the 1990s, charting individuals surviving childhood abuse. In the first of my texts, Sathnam Sanghera’s memoir *If You Don’t Know Me By Now* (2008) the narrator comments, “somehow I’d gone from not being able to read misery memoirs to writing one” (188). In identifying his text as such, he indicates (albeit somewhat sardonically) that his account is both traumatic and *true*, thus interpolating a sympathetic reader who expects to align themselves with an innocent and traumatised victim-protagonist. His exploration of his family history of schizophrenia plays out alongside his attempt to “come out” to his mother about his life in London and his rejection of her plans for him to have an arranged marriage. The second, *Greetings from Bury Park* (2008), narrates Sarfraz Manzoor’s difficulty in negotiating life as a British Asian man living in Luton, centres on his obsession with Bruce Springsteen, his relationship with his family, and his desire to assimilate.

An awareness of the political potency of these texts becomes apparent in their use of genre. Concern about the safety of Asian women, apparently at risk of forced marriages and honour killings, has been recalibrated into hysteria surrounding British Asian masculinity as a

source of violence. The new significance of Asian men in the popular imagination has regendered academic interest “away from the ‘plight’ of BrAsian young women to[wards] the ‘problem’ of BrAsian young men” (Alexander, 2006, 66). These texts attempt to explain and address this “problem” using a reworking of the “lad lit” genre that emerged in the 1990s; their focus on popular culture and masculinity-in-crisis recalls lad lit’s most famous authors, Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons – a similarity their publishers are keen to make clear, and which bolsters the assimilationist push of the texts. Hornby is a particularly important touchstone, as his 1992 memoir *Fever Pitch* was a huge commercial success and was adapted for the screen; a path that Sanghera’s memoir followed with a television adaptation screening on BBC 2 in 2017.

A notable example of this conscious intervention into the text’s marketing can be seen in the republication of *If You Don’t Know Me By Now* as *The Boy With The Top Knot*. This change moves the book’s reference point from a shared pop culture to a specific – and highly racialised – ur-story. The publication of *Greetings from Bury Park* enacts a slightly different dynamic through its jacket quotations. Parsons is quoted describing the book as “Beautiful and moving... a book to make you believe that we are all more alike than we know.” Parsons’ autobiographical novel *Man and Boy* (1999) was one of lad lit’s commercial successes, telling the story of masculine self-discovery, so this comes as a ringing endorsement for a book in the same vein. The assertion of similarity (“more alike”) assumes its opposite (“than we know”) and so stakes the book’s value in its ability to show us that similarity. This statement derives meaning through Parsons’ position in the cultural establishment: he represents a norm through which Manzoor can be sanctioned. He is also a music journalist, which helps to credentialise Manzoor’s Springsteen obsession. Further, both lad lit and misery memoir are particularly invested in “uncomfortable” or “unpopular” truths

– in cultivating “a sense of unmediated, interpersonal communication” (Ferrebe, 2008, 223) –

by “telling it like it is.” For Sanghera and Manzoor, this means speaking the civilisationist discourse of the War on Terror, against the claim that “political correctness” serves as a cover for moral relativity.

### **Sexuality as selfhood**

The Anxious Asian men narratives become akin to a “coming out” story; another narrative for which memoir has been a key genre.<sup>5</sup> As Esther Saxey notes, coming out narratives “are not a by-product of the process of becoming lesbian, gay or bisexual, but a contribution to the work of creating such identities” (2008, 3). To push this further, these stories necessarily impact on understandings of sexuality more generally, and circumscribe the narrative resources for heterosexuals too. In these memoirs, the protagonist knows he is different in some crucial way from his family and community; he locates this difference in his commitment to a set of values and aesthetics he associates with whiteness, assumed to be neutral. It is through this commitment that he is able to admit his “authentic self.” The protagonists retain strong investments in the idea of assimilation, framed as an identification with multicultural, liberal Britain, rather than the former outright rejection of their South Asian origins. By publishing these texts as memoirs, the authors are able to capitalise on their public profiles as broadsheet journalists.

These memoirs explore the centrality of masculinity, heterosexuality, and marriage to conceptions of the good life. They find in these structures a route to authentic selfhood and self-realisation: the hallmarks of neoliberalism’s constrained but compelling vision of freedom. I use the term ‘neoliberal masculinity’ to encapsulate the ways in which

individualism is cultivated in these texts as a moral or political good in and of itself, and is grounded in a restricted vision of freedom based on choice, for which consumerism is the model. As the Asian family is viewed as producing a dysfunctional masculinity, while the market is presented as the route to masculine self-realisation. These visions of freedom are particularly seductive for the Anxious Asian men, as cultural racism has designated South Asians as uniquely defined by a static, clannish, and restrictive reliance on tradition. As Shamira Meghani notes, these assumptions allow for the closet to be repositioned as “ethnic”, leading to a spate of “coming out” narratives set in South Asian or Muslim communities (2015). The innovation in these memoirs, however, can be found in their *submerged* reliance on homosexuality. They draw on the dominant discourse of selfhood in which sexuality is viewed as foundational, yet the texts betray little interest in the erotic. Rather, their investment is in romantic love, ending in marriage, with a partner of their own choosing. Or, as Sanghera summarises in his memoir, “I don’t want to live a partial life. I want to make the most of the freedoms I’ve been granted and I want to end up with someone who wants to be with me for what I am” (298). This formula, not least the expectation that one ‘ends up’ somewhere, rather starkly illustrates Judith Roof’s contestation that, across all genres, the requirement of narrative closure produces (re)productive endings and, as such, all narrative is “heteronarrative” (Roof, 1996). Their investment in love marriage as a marker of self-realisation works in tandem with the ascendancy of gay marriage in the national imaginary, as both texts were published in the years following the Civil Partnership Act 2004.

This model of selfhood, in which sexuality is central, is borne from ideas about authenticity as a moral imperative. In his attempt to understand “the moral force of the ideal of authenticity”, Charles Taylor traces its roots to the eighteenth century, which saw the transformation and development of Christian ideas of an inner dialogue with God (1992, 17).



As Taylor notes, this was transformed into having a dialogue with one's own inner depths. Initially, this dialogue is simply a means to a connection with the divine, though it later becomes seen as an inherent good. As Taylor summarises,

*On the original view, the inner voice is important because it tells us what is the right thing to do. Being in touch with our moral feelings would matter here, as a means to the end of acting rightly. What I'm calling the displacement of the moral accent comes about when being in touch takes on independent and crucial moral significance. It comes to be something we have to attain to be true and full human beings. (26)*

This sense of an interior voice that must be identified and developed as a moral imperative can be harnessed by a variety of projects, but has a particular purchase in the context of desire. The idea that the "inner voice" speaks an "authentic" truth, that morality is intuitive rather than something to be learnt or calculated, is one that has been modified to refer to sexuality; the moral accent has been displaced once again. In this case, sexuality (in its limited form as "sexual orientation") becomes the core of an "inner self" which must be identified, accepted and made public – in Humaira Saeed's formulation, "must move from secrecy to disclosure" (2017, 282) – in order to attain a kind of wholeness.<sup>6</sup>

This move towards seeing sexuality as the foundation of being has multiple roots, traceable back through colonial science, which sought to categorise all forms of human and non-human life. The Linnean system of classification, for example, works according to the "sexual" parts of plants (Londa Shiebinger, 1993, 11-39). A better-known source comes from Freudian thinking, which locates the sexual drives as the dynamic force behind all human

development, albeit through complex forms of repression, sublimation, and socialisation. The popularisation of a Freudian model flattens this complexity into the now familiar discourse of an authentic sexual self, whose normative drives can and should be fulfilled. Antony Giddens notes the way in which this becomes central to the discourse of the self:

*In so far as it is focused upon the life-span, considered as an internally referential system, the reflexive project of self is oriented only to control. It has no morality other than authenticity, a modern version of the old maxim 'to thine own self be true'. Today, however, given the lapse of tradition, the question 'Who shall I be?' is inextricably bound up with 'How shall I live?' A host of questions present themselves here, but so far as sexuality is concerned that of sexual identity is the most obvious.' (1992, 197-8)*

It is into this context – in which the imperative of authenticity is tied to sexual orientation – that the metaphor of the closet becomes so central: to live well is to live openly, with no discontinuities between desire, action, and the perceptions others might hold of you.

## **Culture and Violence**

The texts I examine rework a set of familiar tropes, hinging upon an inherent culture clash in which South Asia is the “tradition” against which Western “modernity” must struggle for inevitable dominance. In this way, the “clash of civilisations” is positioned as playing out within ever-smaller units, finally articulated as the double life of an individual. From this paradigm emerges narratives of an identity crisis in which an authentic self emerges through the triumph of individualism over collective ties. As Ruvani Ranasinha

notes, “Minority writers are often positioned by the dominant culture as authoritative mediators” (2007, 6). The much-maligned “burden of representation” is actively shouldered in these texts; it is arguably their *raison d’être*. Sanghera stages himself as a native informant, and refers to “the switch from West to East, South to North, English to Punjabi, rationality to superstition” (8). Given the ways that the writers collude with this characterisation of South Asians as backward, the neoliberal masculinity achieved by the protagonists does significant cultural work, positioning “good” cultural or racial difference (an essentially decorative quality, rather than one constituted by the political context) as a bulwark against its intransigent and dangerous counterparts.

Though the War on Terror has seen some significant innovations (the finessing of homonationalism,<sup>7</sup> for example), the sexualised racism through which it operates draws on entrenched forms of racism by “Islamicis[ing] older racial categories” (Bhattacharyya, 75). As such, the characterisation of British Asian communities across religion as backward, homogenous, and beholden to unchanging and mindless traditions continues to animate forms of racism that are directed squarely at Muslims, and which other British Asian religious communities sometimes collude with the state in supporting. The most resilient trope in this conception of tradition is that South Asian cultures harbour a distinct culture of domestic abuse. This issue has been a fraught one for British Asian feminists: In *The Empire Strikes Back*, for example, Pratibha Parmar cautions against providing “further fodder for the liberal racist” who sees Asian families as “particularly barbaric and tyrannical” (1986, 251). In contrast, Gita Sahgal and other members of Southall Black Sisters posit that this approach is a form of anti-racist dogma that undermines women’s struggles against patriarchy and violence (1989). Given this complex and politically charged field, Asian women’s stories have often been solicited, by both activists and the state, as a means of either confirming or

contesting the idea of Asian women as victims of tradition. These memoirs of British Asian masculinity can be seen as a way to push back against this conception of British Asian men as perpetrators of domestic violence, as well as a way of claiming the position of victim through the deployment of the misery memoir as a generic touchstone.

As Asians become more prominent in British public life, and as the sexualised racism of the War on Terror becomes more entrenched, there is a growing interest in British Asian men, both in the popular press and in more academic literature, generated by a set of interrelated “figures” who join the “domestic abuser” as a perpetrator of violence. These figures – the “homegrown terrorist”, the “Asian Gang” and the “model minority” – are all (differently) dependent on a model of Asians as defined by an unchanging and anti-modern culture. Concerns about “Islamic Fundamentalism” became crystallised following the September 11th attacks in 2001. Images showing the destruction of the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon; the scale and tenor of the international response to the attacks; and the particular quality of Britain’s reaction (given the “special relationship” between the two nations) – all of these ensured that the events would come to define the new millennium in the national (and, perhaps, international) imaginary. The fear of Islamic terrorism grew solidly in the following years, stoked partially in order to justify Britain’s controversial presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the attacks on civil liberties at home.

The 7/7 attacks – a series of suicide bombings on tubes and buses in London that left 52 dead in July 2005 – gave a new shape to the fear; public space, especially in the capital, was seen as existing in a state of heightened threat and vulnerability. Further, many of the bombers were revealed to be British, from Leeds, Luton and Bradford, bringing the figure of the “homegrown terrorist” into the popular imagination. Manzoor intervenes directly into this

context, expressing a view that could be taken directly from the mouths of the far right. In reference to the 7/7 attacks, the narrator states:

“I’d say, if you hate this country so much, why don’t you just fuck off to somewhere that’s Muslim enough for you. [...]”

[His friend responds] “Mate, everyone we know thinks that [...] Fact is, it used to be the white man who made our lives shit. Now it’s the Muslims.” (369)

Manzoor here demonstrates the centrality of Muslim voices as exponents of British raciology. As we know from Mamdani and Saba Mahmood, the figure of the “moderate” Muslim is strategically deployed in the War on Terror. Manzoor, instead, speaks in the language of Cameron’s “muscular liberalism:” the tone (“why don’t you just fuck off”; “mate”; “fact is”) indicates a vernacular Britain that is down-to-earth and straight talking. In this assertion, Manzoor displays the common national imaginary shared by mainstream political parties and Far Right groups such as the English Defence League. In embedding this perspective within a narrative devoted to the universalism of pop music and romantic love, Manzoor bolsters Islamophobia as form of common sense.

The Islamic Fundamentalist is joined by a related folk devil, the Asian Gang. As Claire Alexander notes, the idea of the Asian Gang gained currency in the 1990s, bringing together a potent mix of fears around urban criminality, underclass poverty, and, following the Rushdie affair, religious fundamentalism. The gang is already a racialised trope, predominantly associated with African-Caribbean men, and the Asian Gang “also carries its own culturally specific twists – of culture conflict, religious antipathy, of alienness and

unknowability, of introspective, intra-ethnic hatred” (Alexander: 2000, xiii). The notion of an unchanging first generation diasporic culture, imported wholesale from a homeland held outside of history, becomes one half of the culture clash model through which British Asian men are assumed to forge their identities. As Wendy Brown notes, while the West are assumed to “have” culture, others are assumed to “be” culture (2008, 151). The story goes that, unable to reconcile “tradition” with the forms of consumerist individualism offered by modernity, Asian youth turn to violence. Sanghera’s memoir is peppered with references to brand names, clothes, and property, which, read alongside his affiliation with whiteness, presents a less vexed embrace of consumerism. The gang discourse posits violence as stemming from a collective defined by mindless loyalty, against the rational, sanctioned and legible connections of romantic love or the nuclear family. In this way, the gang shares a poetics with the racialised discourses of the extended family and the ethnic community, presented in these memoirs as illogical, insular and threateningly distinct from British society.

The homegrown bomber and the Asian gang complicate but do not displace the idea of Asian men as “thrifty, insular, academic and occasionally exotic” (Banarjea and Banarjea: 1996, 115). This figure – “other” but broadly unthreatening – is most easily transformed into a success story, the “model minority” who is an asset to multicultural Britain. Formed through the pressures of traditional family structures, the imperative to hard work, academic success, and (crucially) sexual repression, this figure forms the backdrop for narratives of assimilation. This character is the least threatening, yet still characterised by a fundamental otherness. He embodies the untransformed “traditional” culture from which he emerges, almost untouched by the Western world in which he lives, but his actions never confront this world and its values. The achievement of neoliberal masculinity depicted in these texts is, at

its heart, a way to vanquish this figure. Furthermore, this figure is dependent on the same conception of culture as the one from which the Asian Gang and the homegrown terrorist emerge. Alexander observes, “written into this attribution of cultural homogeneity and particularity are the seeds of its inevitable atrophy, a sense of cultural displacement and anachronism” (5). In this manner, we can see VS Naipaul’s “Mimic Men” as a precursor to this agitated wrangling with South Asian masculinity, sharing a similar conception of South Asian cultures as stagnant pools in stark comparison to the tide of modernity represented by Europe. While these different tropes and figures may compete for cultural relevance, they adhere to a notion of South Asian culture as tradition-bound, sexually conservative, with arranged marriage and strong family structures forming the central planks of social life. Arranged marriage is understood as fundamentally repressive, with marriage based on choice forming a norm assumed to be universal and natural.

### **“Coming out”**

As homosexuality transforms in the popular imaginary, from sexually deviant to powerfully authentic, the gendering and sexualisation of racial difference is also altered. Normativity becomes hinged not on gender complementarity – a heterosexual union – but on authentic desire, channelled into romantic love. This model of normativity, as with its predecessors, is used as an index not only of cultural belonging, but as a sign of moral good. As Bhattacharyya observes, “freedom of sexual expression can stand in as an archetypal social ‘freedom’ because we live in a culture that imagines fulfilment in terms of intimacy and sexual autonomy and views sexual expression as one of the purest expressions of self – what we really really want” (14). According to this logic, sexual repression is the pinnacle of sexual deviance. This misreading of a Freudian view of subjectivity, which recasts the

unconscious as a repository of desires that *are* attainable if not circumscribed by the strictures of “tradition,” is crucial to my definition of neoliberal masculinity. South Asian men, in particular Muslims, are viewed as unique figures of sexual repression. Though this does not displace the generative images of South Asian, Arab and Muslim men as sexually deviant in other ways, the idea of sexual repression changes shape as gay subjects become “folded into life” (Puar, 2007, 30). As Puar notes, “In the face of the centrality of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* to the field of queer studies, it is somewhat baffling that some queer theorists have accepted at face value the discourse of Muslim sexual repression” (2007, 93-4). This observation begins to unpick the ways in which queer theory fails to account for its own erasures and the kinds of normativity built into frameworks that claim to oppose the creation of norms.<sup>8</sup>

Though the texts I examine in this article are not stories of repressed homosexual desire, the closet nonetheless looms large. Eve Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* provides some crucial foundational thought in this area, in particular via her theorisation of the closet as “the secret of having a secret” (1990, 205). The “secret” in these narratives of assimilation becomes sexual normativity defined by choice. “Choice” in Manzoor and Sanghera's interior lives is represented by white women; their desire for whiteness, for white women, animates their claims to neoliberal masculinity. For Manzoor, this desire is sublimated into his desire for Bruce Springsteen, while Sanghera's desire for white women is more explicitly rendered. When set up on a date with a Punjabi woman, he observes, “because so many British Asians are (like me), for want of a better word, schizophrenic, constantly switching between personas to fit into different worlds, you have absolutely no idea what end of the Punjabi spectrum they are coming from, and whether they mean what they say” (333). Despite the clarification earlier in the text that the common sense understanding of schizophrenia as



having multiple personalities is clinically incorrect, Sanghera uses the term in its vernacular here. The notion of a Punjabi “spectrum” asserted in the register of mental illness further compounds the notion of South Asian culture – here, of course, embodied by a woman – as pathological.

In this context, arranged marriage is the essential symbol of sexual backwardness; it is the opposite of modernity, and an anathema to the neoliberal self. As Jin Haritaworn points out, “to be a neoliberal citizen who loves well means to perform one’s emotion in distinction from uncultivable poor and racialized populations who are reduced to base instincts and impulses” (2015, 89). I would add to this observation that to perform love well is also to do so out of choice, a form of *refined* instinct, but not, crucially, out of obligation, contract, or social necessity. As Werner Sollors notes with regard to the changing role of marriage in the eighteenth century, “By the yoking of love and marriage, betrothals were removed from the controls of descent [...] and opened to the forces of consent” (1986, 111). The tensions between consent (rendered as choice) and descent (rendered as familial control) form the central dramatic dynamic in these texts.

In Manzoor’s memoir, it is his obsession with Bruce Springsteen that stands in for homosexuality as a marker of his allegiance to a set of values distinct from his parents. Though not a secret, it nonetheless catalyses a set of events that share the tropes of traditional “coming out” narratives: he discovers Springsteen and through this discovery, he encounters a community that acts as an alternative to the British Pakistani community he rejects and feels rejected by, which in turn leads to his moving from Luton to London, framed as a move from the parochial to the urbane. Each of these events shares the mode of a “coming out” story. His discovery of Springsteen occurs through a friend – another “outsider” character.

This trope is often present in coming out stories, whereby an “out” queer takes the novice protagonist to a gay bar. This first discovery leads to a new sense of belonging: he describes Bruce Springsteen fans as “citizens of an imagined community of like-minded people” (104). This “imagined community” is dispersed, transnational, and elective, a poetics of diaspora that characterises both the British Asian community that he aims to distance himself from, and the queer community with which he shows an affiliation. As in the discourse of “queer diaspora”, in Manzoor’s diasporic imaginary, “the heterosexual family is posited as the originary site of trauma” (Fortier, 2002, 189). Through this community, Manzoor forges a new sense of identity, distinct from his family who he sees as being defined by race and religion.

Pop culture comes to stand in as a counterpoint to religion: indeed, pop music becomes almost fungible with Islam in Manzoor’s spiritual economy: “Whenever the conversation turned to how I had given up on my religion, the good name of Springsteen would be used in vain” (226). Sanghera makes the comparison explicit: “My siblings were all married to spouses of the correct race, religion and caste... I had, well, a rather large record collection” (12). Pop music is presented as profoundly educative, as the carrier of eternal truths: “[Springsteen songs were] about being true to yourself and about being the best you can be” (101). Sanghera’s memoir echoes this sentiment, stating: “I want to end up with someone who wants to be with me for what I am” (298). These quotations signal a total belief in the Cartesian subject, filtered into a bubblegum pop vernacular. This belief is a means by which the narrators align themselves with their white counterparts – notably Hornby, whose novel *High Fidelity* also suggests that masculine identity can be found in record stores. Pop music is set up as a belief in eternal truths, rather than arbitrary and repressive South Asian “traditions.”

Within the logic of this “coming out” narrative, Manzoor’s move away from his hometown becomes inevitable; in order to access his sexual freedom, to “be himself”, he has to move to London. Luton has become notorious, a flashpoint in Britain’s lurid psychogeography. The EDL were originally United Peoples of Luton, a group formed following protests by Muslim groups against Britain’s military presence in Afghanistan. Luton was also the town from which the 7/7 London bombers set off, a fact that Manzoor notes with concern. He refers to parts of Luton as “overwhelmingly” Pakistani, employing the favoured anti-immigration rhetoric of being “swamped” or “overrun”. Manzoor states, “My eyes were fixed firmly on the future, a life far from Luton and all its limitation” (39). This dynamic is almost identical in Sanghera’s memoir, with Wolverhampton paralleling Luton. The move from small town to big city is a staple of the “coming out” genre, with the relationship between homosexuality and urbanisation being well established.<sup>9</sup> John D’Emilio shows the way that the changes to the family produced by urbanisation allow for “homosexual desire to coalesce into personal identity”, and for gay people to become constituted as a group (1983). As Kath Weston identifies, “the symbolics of urban and rural relations figure in the peculiarly Western construction of homosexuality as a sexual identity capable of providing a basis for community” (255). In these memoirs, the association between the city as the site of sexual possibility that the “coming out” story so often relies upon is mobilised to explain the protagonists’ investment in moving to London.

These parallels with “coming out” become salient if we see Springsteen as a symbol of Manzoor’s affiliation with whiteness; the supposed universalism of pop music clichés stands in for a universalised white culture. By sublimating the libidinal drive towards whiteness into his investment in Springsteen, the text’s sexual dynamics are obscured. Yet there are

moments in which this sexual fascination with white women is more explicitly expressed. Manzoor states, “I would be particularly on the lookout for photographs where one of the couple was not white; occasionally there would be black men and white women but I never saw an Asian man with a white bride” (179). This secret obsession is banal, yet key to the text’s mechanics: Springsteen functions as a cover for an investment in whiteness that can only be explicitly stated once the text establishes whiteness as neutral in its own terms. The “coming out” narrative is more overt in Sanghera’s memoir, and directly frames the protagonist’s desire for white women. The memoir begins and ends with an attempt to write a letter to his mother, explaining that he does not want an arranged marriage, and that he intends to date – and eventually marry – a white woman, as he has been doing in secret for years. In the final chapter, he explains that in preparing to speak to his mother, he read a book entitled, *Acts of Disclosure: The Coming-out Process of Contemporary Gay Men*, and was “struck” by the similarities (304). This comparison is bolstered by the descriptions of anxiety regarding being seen with his girlfriends in public, due to fears that someone would see him and report back to his family.

Their desire for white women – and view of them as more sexually available than their Asian counterparts – could be unnerving to a reader that the text interpolates as white through its explanations, translations, glosses and digressions. Yet it is also a desire that aligns them with lad lit and its view of (white) women and marriage as a panacea for feckless, immature, and anxious men. Further, young, attractive Asian women make scant appearance in the texts; it is Asian mothers that loom large in their psychic lives. In Dhaliwal’s *Tourism*, his cruelly satirical portrait of his mother sets up a caricature that can be found across this archive of texts: “BEHOLD! THE ASIAN family: unit of tradition, moral strength, and business acumen! Behold! my mother: matriarch and fulcrum, proud bearer of sons, stately in

her new sari, her one eyebrow draped across her forehead, her moustache downy like an adolescent boy's" (193). His mother becomes a tragicomic figure, characterised through Puppy's visceral repudiation of her. The mother in both of Sanghera's texts and in Manzoor's memoir share many of the characteristics indicated above: they are stubborn, overbearing and loyal. Further, even after Sanghera's mother accepts his decision not to have an arranged marriage, she insists that he cannot marry someone from a lower caste (313). This bathetic ending is used to calcify the mother – and the forms of kinship she represents – as unreasonable, arbitrary, and tyrannical, and in doing so invests their desire for white women with a kind of moral and political integrity.

As I have noted, in these narratives, the choice of sexual partner is viewed as the epitome of freedom. This claim to freedom and the assertion of western liberal individuality is a much-repeated incantation. Sanghera repeatedly states his commitment to individualism: "you have to live with the person you love; individual happiness is everything; you can't live your life for other people" (42). As Jacques Derrida notes in *Spectres of Marx*, "exorcism consists in repeating in the mode of an incantation that the dead man is really dead" (1994, 70). I suggest that the listing of these aphoristic phrases, and the constant assertion of neoliberal individualism's inherent superiority, is an attempt to exorcise the other forms of collective, sexual, and familial organisation that haunt the narrators, even as they claim their freedom. When in Pakistan for a funeral, Manzoor notes his physical resemblance to his family; "I thought these are my relatives, I am part of them and they are part of me" (73). This sense of connection remains powerful, yet its tautological expression conveys a sense of unreality; Manzoor feels this connection but cannot make sense of it. Sanghera, similarly, cannot cast off his familial attachments: "Though I would never have admitted it [...], the biggest obstacle was not my family but me. I saw myself as the dutiful son". These forms of

kinship retain a hold over the narrators that go beyond the bonds of familial love; rather, they continue to shape their self-perception and act as a measure of their fragile neoliberal masculinity.

### **Conclusion: countering extremism with normativity**

As noted, these texts are published when fear of “Islamic terrorism” has revived popular interest in British Asian masculinity. In David Cameron’s speeches as Prime Minister, he continually asserted that a crisis in identity is the enabling or catalysing factor in “radicalising” young men. This notion of an “identity crisis” founded on a “culture clash” is not a recent innovation, but develops a set of deeply embedded cultural logics.<sup>10</sup> As I have shown, this flurry of texts about British Asian masculinity share the assumptions promoted by Conservative governments and, due to their encoded cultural insiderism and ring of authenticity, do considerable political work to promote this idea as common sense.

Despite the investment in the pop music poetics of romantic love, these memoirs are almost devoid of eroticism. Though this may seem at odds with the narrative of the closet from which they draw so heavily, a more subtle parallel can be found in the desexualisation of gay life and politics. As Rahul Rao notes, Western gay activism has seen a move from “sex rights” to “love rights”. Further, “that marriage (a ‘love right’) curtails the very liberty that is the object of ‘prior’ struggles for ‘sex rights’” (2014, 170). This deployment of love is implicitly contrasted with an Orientalist view of the ‘East’ as hypersexual. As Bhattacharyya observes, “it is the east that is portrayed as consumed by sex and, unable to exercise the discipline of western manners, must result in more substantial constraints” (99). I propose that it is this view of South Asian kinship structures – as tyrannical attempts to curb sexual

excess – that helps to account for the marked absence of sex in these memoirs. The focus on an abstract romance helps to legitimise the sexualised racism of the War on Terror.

The ideas about sexuality expressed by the Anxious Asian men, their reliance on homonormativity, and their expression of assimilation as a bulwark against extremism all find explicit political expression in the Conservative (or Conservative-led) governments. As Prime Minister, David Cameron pushed through gay marriage and posited homophobia as a sign of “radicalisation.”<sup>11</sup> These uses of homonormativity have gained power precisely through their presence in cultural production. As such, we must remain attentive to the drifts in cultural texts, the ideas they espouse and the ways they forge new forms of common sense about sexuality, precisely in the forms of cultural production that seem least invested in the erotic.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lila Abu-Lughod (2013), Judith Butler (2008) and Jasbir Puar (2007) for an analysis of each of these three figures respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See Gopinath (2005), Brah (2005) for critiques of the 'culture clash' model.

<sup>3</sup> Arun Kundnani explores this change in the scholarship in some detail in 'Decade Lost', *Rethinking Radicalisation and Extremism*, Claystone (2015).

<sup>4</sup> The popularisation of life-writing has now led to the claim, published in *The New Yorker*, that "The Personal Essay Boom is Over" (Jia Tolentino, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Memoirs such as Edmund White *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) are staples of queer literature classes.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the conception of sexuality as the core of the self – and the centrality of this notion to racialization – see Ann Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Homonationalism was coined by Jasbir Puar, who builds on ideas around homonormativity to show the ways in which gay rights can be cleaved to neo-imperial projects of nation-building and foreign intervention

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Massad quotes Michael Warner’s observation that ‘Queer politics continues regularly to invoke norms of liberal modernity such as self-determination and self-representation; it continues to invoke a civil-society politics against the state; and most significant to my mind, it continues to value sexuality by linking it to the expressive capacities of individuals. [...] although queer theory expresses scepticism about other elements of the modern sexual ideology, it relies absolutely on norms of expressive individualism and an understanding of sexuality in terms of those norms.’ Michael Warner. 1995. “Something Queer about the Nation-State.” In *After Political Correctness: The Humanities in the 1990s*, edited by Christopher Newfield and Ronald Strickland. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. 367, in Massad, p. 233.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the relationship between urbanization and gay identity, see Christine Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Virinder Kalra notes that this idea was present in “a Channel Four – terrestrial – television documentary ‘Culture Clash?’”, which was aired in 2002 attempting to explore the reasons for alienation amongst young Muslims in the North of England, causally linked to the riots.” As such, it is clear that this logic has been and continues to be articulated in other contexts of crisis or violence in Britain. See Virinder Kalra, “Between Emasculation and Hypermasculinity: Theorizing British South Asian Masculinities.” *South Asian Popular Culture*. 7.2 2009: 113-125 (p. 113).

<sup>11</sup> Though ‘screening’ for homophobia has not been systematically folded into the Prevent programme, former Conservative Education Minister, Nicky Morgan stated that “Homophobic views may be a sign that a pupil is at risk of becoming an extremist”. BBC News, 30 June 2015.