Introduction: Textualizing the Self

According to Kenan Malik, Britain is becoming more tribal. In his exploration of the period since the 1989 Fatwa on Salman Rushdie, he concludes:

Multicultural policies in the 1980s had helped create a more tribal Britain by encouraging people to see themselves in narrower ethnic or cultural terms.¹

In many ways, this development is contrary to the ideal vision of a multicultural perspective on life, which is best summed up in Bhikhu Parekh’s central ideas of intercultural dialogue, the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the recognition of the internal plurality of all cultures and that these all have different visions of the good life.² However, there seems to be in socio-political multicultural discourses and in multicultural lived realities in Britain a

¹ Kenan Malik, From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy (London: Atlantic, 2009): 102. Malik reiterates his observations on tribalism throughout the book thus: “a much darker side to multiculturalism, as the Rushdie affair demonstrated. Multiculturalism has helped foster a more tribal nation” and “Britain has changed hugely in that time [twenty years ago]. It has become more tribal. It has also become less racist” (From Fatwa to Jihad, xx and 135).

discrepancy between the ideal vision of convivial coexistence, facilitated through “a sympathetic imagination, tolerance, openness to other ways of life and thought, curiosity and mutual respect,”³ and the real experience of what Amartya Sen has called “plural monoculturalism”⁴ – or Malik’s tribalism – embodied in a lack of social cohesion and a popular feeling that multiculturalism is a failed national project. In fact, even literature that is advertised as depicting multicultural Britain often tends to reveal a monocultural or tribal Britain instead. This article focuses on three recent memoirs – Sarfraz Manzoor’s *Greetings from Bury Park: Race, Religion, Rock’n’Roll* (2007), Sathnam Sanghera’s *The Boy with the Topknot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets and Lies in Wolverhampton* (2008), and Yasmin Hai’s *The Making of Mr Hai’s Daughter: Becoming British* (2008) – which attest to but also critique the surprising development of a multicultural yet tribal Britain. All three writers are journalists born in the early 1970s who probe their lives and those of their families to construct an individual subjectivity in an environment that wants them to represent their ethnic groups – their tribe. The focus will be on how their individual conundrums are (almost) solved through the process of textualizing, or writing, the self in the increasingly popular genre of the memoir. The discussion will be threefold: I will first discuss Manzoor’s juggling with various modes of being, drawing on Appiah’s scripts, then Sanghera’s battle with the memoir genre and how to write the self, and conclude with Hai’s developing awareness of what constitutes Englishness, or, more precisely, multicultural Englishness.

³ This list makes up what Parekh calls ”multicultural skills and virtues” (*Rethinking Multiculturalism*, 94).

⁴ Sen defines plural monoculturalism as ”having two styles or traditions coexisting side by side, without the twain meeting”, Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin, 2007): 157. We might note here, however, that the remark seems to conflate Parekh’s useful distinction between multiculture as a description of a society with two or more cultures and multiculturalism as a response to that fact (*Rethinking Multiculturalism*, 6). But here we are entering one of the minefields of multiculturalism. In the words of Kenan Malik: “The term ‘multicultural’ has come to define both a society that is particularly diverse, usually as a result of immigration, and the policies necessary to manage such a society. It has come to embody, in other words, both a description of a society and a prescription for managing it. Multiculturalism is both the problem and the solution” (*From Fatwa to Jihad*, 69).