**A star turn from Ayub Khan Din at the centre of this timely revival of *East is East* to the London stage**

On 20th April 1968, the Conservative MP for Wolverhampton, Enoch Powell, gave one of the most controversial speeches in British political history. Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech spoke of the perceived dangers of increasing immigration in the most inflammatory terms. Mass immigration would, he claimed, lead to a “systematic colonisation” of towns in which the white British would be displaced and find their country transformed into a society where “the black man will have the whip hand over the white man."[[1]](#footnote-1) Powell insisted that the answer lay in repatriation and even advocated financial rewards for those who did return to their homelands. Powell’s offer led the British Jamaican comedian Lenny Henry to brilliantly quip: “Enoch Powell has offered me £1,000 to go home which is great, because it’s only £10 from here to Birmingham”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The youngest of ten children born to an English mother and a Pakistani father in Salford, playwright and screenwriter Ayub Khan Din was six when Powell gave his notorious speech. In *East is East*, his most famous play, which was adapted into a highly successful film in 1999, conflicting cultural allegiances within a family of British Pakistanis during Powell’s era are dramatized and examined. Indeed in the film version of *East is East*, Powell makes two background appearances - on posters advertising a speech at Salford Town Hall and on television talking about repatriation.

Starting this October, *East is East* is once again on the London stage. First performed in 1996, the storyline of *East is East* is well known and is based on Khan Din’s own experiences growing up in 1970s Salford. The play, and film, explores the disorienting experience of settlement in Britain for Pakistani immigrants and their British-born children. Zahir “George” Khan is a Pakistani immigrant who is married to white British Ella with whom he has seven children. The Khan family own a fish and chip shop on the corner of the Salford street where they live. George is determined to raise his children as “Pakistani”, against which the children rebel by dressing in the contemporary fashions, avoiding circumcision, or in the case of Saleem, going to art school rather than, as his father believes, training as an engineer. Tension hits fever pitch when George arranges the marriage of his sons Abdul and Tariq to the daughters of local entrepreneur Mr. Shah.

As demonstrated by Powell’s speech, 1970s Britain was not always welcoming for Pakistani immigrants such as Khan Din’s father and his fictional counterpart, George. Often struggling to make ends meet in low-paid, labour intensive jobs, Pakistani immigrants also faced endemic racism, or in the imaginative language of many “Paki-bashing”. In a recent article about immigrant communities in the West Midlands, Stuart Jeffries remembers the effects of racism on the children of immigrants, specifically recalling children chanting “Enoch Powell! Enoch Powell!” to their non-white peers in the playground.[[3]](#footnote-3) Likewise, Hanif Kureishi remembers racial abuse at school from students as well as a teacher who condescendingly called him “Pakistani Pete”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Given its dramatization of the socio-economic difficulties Pakistani migrants faced upon arrival in the UK, it is unsurprising that a number of people have a special fondness for the play and its film adaptation. A few minutes before the Friday evening showing of the play I attended, I overheard a conversation between a British Asian couple: “I really hope they don’t make a dog’s dinner of this” the thirty-something woman pined, “East is East is so personal for me, it was MY life.”

Fortunately, the new production is little short of a triumph - an acutely sensitive production that is exceedingly well acted and, at times, hilarious. As Ella Khan, Jane Horrocks delivers a beautifully measured performance of quiet but gutsy strength. Alongside Horrocks’s terrific portrayal of his long suffering wife, George Khan is played by Ayub Khan Din himself. Compared with George Khan’s iconic imagining at the hands of veteran Indian actor Om Puri in the film version, Khan Din gives the audience a far more vulnerable and complex interpretation of the patriarch.

At one point in the production, George is alone with Abdul, nursing his son as he weeps over the division in his family and his forced marriage to a woman he has never met. As George tried to comfort Abdul, he looked out into the audience and, through Khan Din, the character’s bewilderment with his life and his position became briefly apparent. This was a particularly emotional moment as Khan Din brought a personal sense of dislocation and confusion to a man who is completely adrift from his family and those around him. How had he gone from arriving in the UK so full of hope and ambition to make a better life for himself, to living in a crowded house with a tin bath and outhouse, fathering children that he simply cannot understand? Such sensitivity I find lacking in Puri’s blundering brute in the film.

Stellar performances from the actors playing the recalcitrant brood are matched with a well devised set. The set design ensures that different rooms and different characters are visible simultaneously, thus cultivating a sense of claustrophobia that exacerbates the cultural and generational tensions. The theatre production was particularly adept at highlighting how the cramped spaces of the family’s terraced house provokes familial conflict and heightens the tensions between conflicting cultural loyalties within the household.

Likewise, the ruminations on cultural identities in the play version of East is East are far more nuanced than those proposed in the film. Unlike the film’s more binary approach, in which the young Khans are forced to choose between British and Pakistani identification, Abdul’s speech in the second act of the play articulates a more complex positioning. Abdul describes feeling a confounding mixture of belonging and alienation towards both British and Pakistani communities:

I was pathetic, tonight in the pub with the lads. We sat drinking, telling jokes, playing music, telling more jokes. Jokes about sex, thick Irish men, wog jokes, chink jokes, Paki jokes. And the the biggest joke was me, ’cause I was laughing the hardest. And they laughed at me because I was laughing. It seemed as though the whole pub was laughing at me, one giant grinning mouth. I just sat there and watched them, and I didn’t belong, I was crying, crying so hard I couldn’t catch my breath, so I ran and kept on running. When I got home, me dad was here praying, I watched him Tariq, and it was right to be here, to be part of this place, to belong to something. It’s what I want. I know me dad’ll always be a problem, but I can handle that now, perhaps I might make him change; but I don’t want that out there, it’s not who I am, it’s as alien to me as me dad’s world is to you.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Nonetheless, considering the the rapid changes in how British Muslims are depicted culturally, East is East sometimes feels dated. The British Pakistani identities that the play and the film probe all predate the events of the last two decades – a dispiriting list that includes 9/11, 7/7, the Woolwich attack, the Rochdale sex-trafficking scandal and the recent phenomena of some British Muslims joining the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. To this end, *East is East* is about the challenges facing British Pakistanis rather than the collective difficulties facing Muslims in Britain, as is scrutinised in later examples of writing and film by British writers of Muslim heritage such as Nadeem Aslam or Leila Aboulela, or even in (non-Muslim) Chris Morris’s satire, *Four Lions*.

What relevance does East is East have for contemporary audiences beyond a walk down memory lane? I turn not to the words of Powell, but the leader of the UK Independence Party Nigel Farage. Mentioning only one of the four nations that make up the UK, Farage said at UKIP’s spring conference that: “In scores of cities and market towns, this country in a short space of time has become, frankly, unrecognisable. In many parts of England you don’t hear English spoken anymore. This is not the kind of community we want to leave to our children and grandchildren.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Anti-immigrant rhetoric reminiscent of Powell appears to have has once again found its way into the mouths of those hoping to achieve political power in the UK. Farage himself claimed, in an interview earlier this year, that he “backed the basic principle” of Powell’s speech. Such a worrying regression to essentialist and exclusive depictions of Britishness means that speeches like Abdul’s now need to heard again.

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Peter Cherry is a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. His research examines constructions of masculinity in literature and film from British writers and filmmakers of Muslim heritage.

Peter is co-organising a series of seminars next year with writers and filmmakers with a Muslim cultural background living and working in Scotland and North East England, funded by the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World.

1. ‘Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of Blood’ Speech’ < http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643826/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html > [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fBZrU3O6c0 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Britain’s most racist election: the story of Smethwick, 50 years on’ by Stuart Jeffries < <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/15/britains-most-racist-election-smethwick-50-years-on> > [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKq77Ov70\_Y [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ayub Khan Din, *East is East* (London: Nick Hearn Books, 1997) p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Mass immigration has left Britain ‘unrecognisable’ says Nigel Farage’ < <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ukip/10668996/Mass-immigration-has-left-Britain-unrecognisable-says-Nigel-Farage.html> > [↑](#footnote-ref-6)