

Talking Shop: investigating the representation of racialised identities in English workplace dramas during the neoliberal era.

Arzhang Luke Pezhman

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy: Creative Critical Scriptwriting

University of East Anglia

School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing

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Abstract

The increasing intensity of late capitalist globalization's impact on everyday life in England, not least in the increased movement of international labour, can be traced to the early 1980s following the Thatcher government's adoption of a neoliberal economic agenda. This period has seen an influx, not only in the numbers of immigrants arriving to establish themselves here as entrepreneurs in the new economic world order, but also a new wave of playwrights of colour eager to represent themselves in the already well-established theatre traditions we have in this country. Writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Sabrina Mahfouz have found themselves adopting a relatively recent genre of Western playwrighting, that of the workplace play, allowing them to explore the relationship between their racial heritage and the machinations of neoliberal society.

This thesis addresses the representation of the foreign Other, by the foreign Other, in English workplace plays (screen and stage) at different stages of the neoliberal era. It interrogates three dramas across this period, as well as presenting three new stage plays that depict the contemporaneous experience of the foreign Other in the neoliberal workplace. It contests the claim that early neoliberalism 'flattened-out' entrenched identity politics in favour of establishing the universal identity of entrepreneur, instead, causing racialised identities to rise up in more virulent forms and creating greater tensions *between* racial groups. It goes on to examine how, at the turn of the millennium, more established neoliberal society employed postcolonial modes of resistance, while simultaneously attempting to whitewash profound, historic racial injustices, fracturing loyalties *within* racial groups. Finally, it extends the analysis beyond race and class (read: neoliberalism) to include gender, and how the theory of intersectionality both highlights the multiple points of oppression women of colour experience, but also suggests possible sources of resistance to neoliberal ideology.

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Introduction

Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) dramatizes the lives of a recent wave of Pakistani immigrants to Britain at that time, as they attempt to establish themselves in the emerging economic reality of the new world order – that of neoliberal society. According to Dardot and Laval, far from the *laissez-faire* market order of the past, neoliberalism requires the dynamic involvement of the state and the operation of a specific legal structure. This new market order arises by claiming competition as its bedrock and, as it is the state that is responsible for structuring this system, the state is also subject to the law of competition. This ideology of 'entrepreneurial governmentality' then traverses the boundaries of the state and into the lives of its subjects, resulting in the self-government of the individual as an enterprise.¹ The consequence of this, according to neoliberalism, is the liberation of individuals from the symbolic orders of the past, including identity politics. It does not matter what your background or heritage is, *all* are welcome in this new ideological framework, with *everyone* having an *equal* opportunity in 'becoming' an entrepreneur. As Nasser states in *My Beautiful Laundrette* "There's *no race question* in the new enterprise culture" [my emphasis].² Within the framework of neoliberal ideology, Nasser's statement appears to be completely accurate. He is clearly enjoying the spoils of entrepreneurial society, driving around his multiple enterprises in an expensive sports car with a glamorous, White mistress by his side. However, the direct context of this utterance, where he claims there is *no question of race* in this new world order, paints a contradictory picture. He announces this to Johnny, a White, ex-fascist who Nasser employs as a bailiff, just as Johnny is violently removing a poet of African-Caribbean heritage³ (at Nasser's request) from his rented apartment, which he then offers rent-free to Johnny if he can "keep this zoo here under control."⁴ Ideologically, neoliberalism claims to eradicate racial bias with balanced economic competition. In reality, what we observe is a stratification of race created by this new form of economic rivalry,

¹ P. Dardot, C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal society* (Kindle Edition, Verso, 2013) [Location 7314 of 7830]

² H. Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Faber & Faber, Kindle Edition, 2014) [Location 1421 of 2608]

³ In the printed screenplay the poet is described as being *a Pakistani man in his fifties*, but in the film itself he is visibly a man of African-Caribbean heritage with a thick Jamaican accent. I have opted for a reading of the performed version, as it is the enactment of speech that is paramount in dramatic writing.

⁴ Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* [Location 1427 of 2608]

whereby neoliberalism “recreates the logic of competition at the level of relations between ‘little communities.’”⁵

The central question underlying the work of this thesis is whether English workplace dramas, written and set in the neoliberal era, represent race and racism as being integral to neoliberal ideology. How did the beginnings of neoliberalism interact with racialised identities in workplace dramas and cause them to rise up in more virulent forms, creating conflict *between* racialised groups? How do workplace dramas represent the ways in which, at the turn of the millennium, a more established neoliberal ideology employs postcolonial phenomena - such as authenticity, hybridity and mimicry - for its own ends, resulting in discord *within* racialised groups? How is the relationship between race and neoliberalism in workplace dramas further complicated when we bring gender in to the picture, and how can intersectionality act as a point of resistance to neoliberal ideology, post-global financial crash? The three workplace dramas that I have chosen to address this line of inquiry are Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), Kwame Kwei-Armah’s *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003) and Sabrina Mahfouz’s *Chef* (2015). The reason for opting for workplace dramas is primarily rooted in my own, early creative writing pursuits, as my first play *Local* (Royal Court, 2000) was a dramatization of personal experiences of inter- and intra-racial violence while working in my Iranian father’s newsagent in Wolverhampton. The workplace drama is the ideal platform for exploring and playing out personal prejudices, precisely because the mechanics of the work drive the action on the surface, while simultaneously acting as a catalyst for prejudicial beliefs that eventually boil over into the world of work. This is especially applicable in the neoliberal society which, with “competition as its bedrock”, sees work as often transgressing the boundaries of the economy into connected spheres of cultural existence and social identity, such as race and gender.

A brief history of the Western (American/European) workplace play

The origins of the Western workplace play can be traced back over 400 hundred years, to Thomas Dekker’s, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1599), a stage play that depicts the life and trials of members

⁵ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7695 of 7830]

of London's livery companies at the time. The play addresses issues of class, and at the heart of the story is a taboo relationship between a citizen and aristocrat, a popular trope at the time. At this time, feudalism in Britain was coming to end, but there was still a great divide between the landed gentry and citizens, whereby the easiest and most direct way to elevate social status was through marriage. By the time Gerhard Hauptmann wrote *The Weavers* (1892), the term 'class' had evolved and was now inextricably linked with the philosophy of Karl Marx. Set during the 1840s Silesian weaver's revolt in Kaschbach, Peterswaldau and Langenbielau, potential upward social mobility through a nuptial union between two individuals from different classes was replaced with the potential of revolt against the industrialists, the working classes uprising in union in order to take control of the means of production. By the time we reach the 20th century, modernist paradigms had begun to influence form in the art world. Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928) is a searing piece of expressionistic work that, through a fractured structure akin to Brecht's Epic theatre techniques, addresses issues of feminism and mental health with prophetic insight. As valuable as these dramas are, my focus is on the way in which race interacts with contemporary ideas of class and gender, and none of these plays address race as a key issue⁶, while the notion of class as a social phenomenon was completely different for each of these periods in Western history. Moreover, although the act of work has a direct impact on characters motives and actions in each of these dramas, the workplace itself is not a strong enough presence. For my case studies, I wanted to analyse dramas with settings that Noel Greig describes as "Location as character" or "Location as story event", whereby "the major story and main character is the location itself."⁷ Greig highlights the story of *The Titanic* to exemplify "how the environment a story takes place in can be an active driving force, not just a background."⁸ I have therefore chosen dramas where the workplace as a location becomes the central, driving factor for characters' motives and actions, which in turn allows issues pertaining to race, class, sexuality and gender to rise to the surface, as the focus of this analysis.

⁶ One could argue that *The Weavers* evokes issues of ethnicity as it involves Silesian workers at the time, Silesia being a historical region of central Europe that overlapped Poland, Germany and Czechia, however this is not a driving factor in determining the dramatic action of the play.

⁷ N. Greig, *Playwriting: A Practical Guide* (Routledge, 2006) p.123

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.125

The term ‘workplace play’ was first used in 1957 when Arnold Wesker wrote his influential and ground-breaking play *The Kitchen*. Set in the busy kitchen of a London restaurant, the play portrays the working lives of thirty chefs, waitresses and kitchen porters as they begin the day preparing the lunch menu. The son of immigrant parents, Wesker is also known for raising the profile of the Jewish community in British culture. However, it was his focus on class conflict in the work environment which earned him the title of godfather of the workplace play. In the same year that Wesker penned *The Kitchen*, the EEC was formed by the signing of the international agreement known as the Treaty of Rome. State intervention of the market through regulation, which had enjoyed its heyday during the rebuilding that took place after the second world war, was now being seen to hinder what some economists believed to be the primacy of the economy. The Treaty began to establish strict rules to prevent competition being distorted by discriminatory measures, abuses of dominant position, and state subsidies.⁹ The social market economy, based on system of exchange value, was in decline. A new economic world order was on the rise, which saw markets across the globe “no longer defined by exchange, but by competition.”¹⁰ Competition was quickly becoming the essence of existence, something that penetrates almost every sphere of the neoliberal Western world today, which as Dardot and Laval argue, give rise to possible consequences that “If exchange operates by equivalence, competition implies inequality.”¹¹

It is the neoliberal era that is the focus of the following chapters, and how this ideology interacts with racialised (as well as gendered and sexualised) identities, therefore at least some attempt at defining these somewhat ‘slippery’ terms seems appropriate before progressing any further.

Sliding signifiers: Neoliberalism and Class, Race and Ethnicity.

According to David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007), neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by

⁹ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 4663 of 7830]

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, [Location 1942 of 7830]

¹¹ *Ibid.*

strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”¹² Its origins can be traced back to the same period in recent history, the late 1970s, but at very different geographical locations across the globe. At this time, Deng Xiaoping, paramount leader of the People’s Republic of China, was looking to liberate China from communist-ruled economy and convert the country into a capitalist powerhouse. He had observed the increase in economic wealth and influence of neighbouring countries (Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea) and “sought to mobilize market socialism instead of central planning to protect and advance the interests of the Chinese state.”¹³ At around the same time, Margaret Thatcher had come into power in the UK and Paul Volcker had taken the reigns of the US Federal Reserve, both touting the fight against inflation and unemployment as their primary objectives. Within a year, Ronald Reagan had come into power and, backing Volcker’s vision, he implemented policies (similar to Thatcher) that would “curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage.”¹⁴ The result has been decades of clamping down on trade unions, rampant privatisation, deregulation of business and a retreat of the state from many areas of social provision.¹⁵ More disconcertingly, this new economic ideology has been formulated and deployed in such a way as to increasingly encompass *every* sphere of existence - from the state, to the markets, to every individual in society – through implementing “techniques of governing that exceed express state action and orchestrate the subject’s conduct towards him- or herself”¹⁶ and ultimately a “way of conducting the conduct of others.”¹⁷ The seeds of neoliberalism had been sown, and the rise of the self-governing, autonomous entrepreneur was well and truly underway. However, this new ideology of hyper-individualism in Britain came about from the efforts and actions of a *group* of ruling elite who had seen their individual and collective wealth and power diminished by post-war Keynesian

¹² D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p.2

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.1

¹⁵ As an immigrant, it would be hypocritical of me not to acknowledge the benefits of Thatcher’s championing of the entrepreneur and support of small business owners, with policies that helped my father set up his newsagents in the early 1980s. Equally, as a playwright, it would be hypocritical of me not to acknowledge the devastating effects that cutbacks in the Arts – driven by neoliberal policy making - have had on English theatre over the past 12 years under Conservative rule.

¹⁶ W. Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2005) p.43

¹⁷ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7685 of 7830]

monetary and fiscal policies, whereby a “social and moral economy (sometimes supported by a strong sense of national identity) was fostered through the activities of an interventionist state.”¹⁸ Through the deregulation of the markets and privatisation of social welfare services, these elites wanted to all but eradicate state intervention in the economy thereby increasing their influence, which indicates that neoliberalism “was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power.”¹⁹

Equally, the concept of race has also evolved over time, proving itself to be a discursive term of classification, often combined with other signifiers - like class - to justify material gain and social dominance. Stuart Hall’s *The Fateful Triangle* is a series of lectures that set out to unsettle the terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ (and ‘nation’) in discourses about culture, ultimately arguing that “all collective identities are subject to fluctuating historical conditions.”²⁰ For example, the biological definition of race that governed Western academic thinking in the 19th century and led to models of racial hierarchy, are an example of a time “when differences of culture and phenotype soon fused with economic desire and exploitation to produce “the African” as a new and mostly negative signifier.”²¹ which was all in the cause of furthering the justification of the Atlantic slave trade. Towards the end of the 20th century, the biological-scientific conception of race was considered to be unfounded and untenable, and the notion of biological difference was being replaced by cultural difference, which leads Hall to conclude that race, as a discourse, “operates like a language, like a sliding signifier; that its signifiers reference not genetically established facts but the systems of meaning that have come to be fixed in the classifications of culture.” Music, fashion, food, religion, politics etc. were the new currencies of difference between ‘racial’ groups in society, which are concepts that pertain more to ‘ethnicity’ rather than ‘race’. However, these cultural practices are still highly racialised, as Hall reaffirms by summarising Paul Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* “whereby questions of cultural belonging have replaced genetic purity while functioning as a coded language for race and color.”²² As with neoliberalism and class, the terms race and ethnicity are interchangeable.

¹⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.11

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16

²⁰ S. Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Kindle Edition, 2017) [Location 257 of 3058]

²¹ *Ibid.*, [Location 57 of 3058]

²² *Ibid.*, [Location 673 of 3058]

However, I have made a distinction in my use of the terms ‘race’ and ‘class’ for each of the chapters. In the first two chapters - that investigate dramas from earlier in the neoliberal period, that are male-centric and portray Pakistani and African-Caribbean workplaces respectively – I predominantly use the term ‘race’, as this is the overriding currency of both the language and actions that the characters employ to differentiate themselves from one another and which creates the conflict that drives the drama, whether that is *between* (as with *My Beautiful Laundrette*) or *within* (as with *Elmina’s Kitchen*) racialised groups. In the third chapter, I investigate the author’s use of the word ‘ethnicity’ in some detail. Written after the global financial crash in 2008, *Chef* stands apart from the first two case studies for several reasons; it is a dramatic monologue, lyrical in form, written by a female author with a multi-ethnic background (English, Welsh, Guyanese, Egyptian), with a focus chiefly on the effect of patriarchal systems on the lives of women in the UK in the early 21st century. The question of gender is the predominant issue in *Chef*, which means issues of ethnicity and class play out more subtly in the background, just as race and class are the front-and-centre themes in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, allowing questions of sexuality to be addressed less directly, more symbolically.

Arnold Wesker’s focus was on class struggle. Since that time, playwrights with immigrant heritage have further explored how economics and class can act as a catalyst for racial tensions both between and within ethnic groups, instances of which I will investigate further in the first two chapters. There has also been a new wave of dramatists that approach these issues in their work on an increasingly intersectional level, incorporating questions of gender and sexuality, as well as race/ethnicity and class at the very heart of their writing. As Hall testifies “We must always bear in mind that other signifiers—of class, gender, and sexuality, for instance—play into and across the discourses of race, ethnicity, and cultural difference, as often as not disrupting rather than corresponding to the way identity is sutured and put into place by diasporic discourses.”²³ I will investigate the manner in which these signifiers are interpreted in these dramas, the way these meanings interact with each other to create new meaning at different stages of the neoliberal era, as well as how these works are in actively

²³ Ibid., [Location 1980 of 3058]

critiquing other systems of oppression that share a capitalist root - from colonialism and the slave trade, to the challenges of patriarchy faced by women of colour in the contemporary workplace.

Structure of the Thesis

The first chapter addresses the question of how early neoliberalism either subordinated or reinforced monolithic identities in a workplace setting, particularly racialised identities. Using *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) as a case study, which is set around the time of conception of neoliberal society in the UK, I will investigate the rise of the neo-subject (neoliberal subject) through the actions and motives of the protagonist, Omar. Neoliberalism claims to flatten out once monolithic identities, such as those founded in race, by inviting *every* member of society to settle for a singular identity – that of the entrepreneur. Neoliberal ideology claims that “fixation with identity...looks like a fall-back position for subjects weary of themselves”²⁴ The rise of the Asian entrepreneur can, in part, be traced back to the industrial strike action of factory employees in the UK in the 1970s “in which (mostly) Asian and (sometimes) Afro-Caribbean workers were in battle both with employers and their (White dominated) local union branches. This included Imperial Typewriters in Leicester (1974) and Mansfield Hosiery in Loughborough...in 1972.”²⁵ This promoted a move towards self-employment, in the form of small businesses, within the Asian community in the early neoliberal era. Supported by Thatcher’s investment in entrepreneurialism, this move was seen as a way out of a repressive system of work for Asian immigrants who “appeared to suffer more from poor employment prospects and racism at work.”²⁶ However, as highlighted in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the neoliberal platform was not a stage on which to ‘right the wrongs’ of a racist legacy inflicted on the Asian community, rather it was podium on which the racial hierarchies of the past might be inverted, seeking retribution and subjugating the White, working-class population in a reversal of the racist legacies of the past. Far from rejecting these monolithic identities of the past, neoliberal subjectivity instils individuals with “a

²⁴ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7696 of 7830]

²⁵ Email correspondence with David Edgar. [Accessed 24th October, 2019]

²⁶ H. Metcalf, T. Modood, S. Virdee, *Asian Self-Employment: Integration of culture and economics in England* (Policy Studies Institute, 1996) p.130

phantasy of omnipotence over things and beings"²⁷, and employs race and racism to create power dynamics between racialised communities.

In the second chapter, the investigation focuses on postcolonial theories of authenticity, hybridity and mimicry in the Black British workplace at the turn of the millennium, as represented in *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003). Two decades after Reagan and Thatcher initiated neoliberal policy making, creating "a legacy and a tradition that tangled subsequent politicians in a web of constraints from which they could not easily escape", immigrants had established businesses in a society where successive leaders such as "Clinton and Blair, could do little more than continue the good work of neoliberalisation, whether they liked it or not."²⁸ However, far from creating a 'stable' environment, I will explore how the economic competition that underpins neoliberal ideology creates divisions *within* the Black British community by a.) instilling a sense of 'label loyalty' in those that pledge their allegiance to different subgroups of the African-Caribbean diaspora and b.) appropriating cultural mimicry and hybridity as a means to an end for marketisation. Through the lens of established postcolonial concepts, I will explore how the Fanonian model of *proper time, proper place* reinforces "that in some circumstances the socius is more important than the individual,"²⁹ which counters hegemonic theories about the psychology of Black victimhood and proposes that the illusion of the individual (a concept at the heart of neoliberalism) as driven solely by internal motives and unreflective of their history, society and environment "is a dangerous myth...perpetuated by the ruling groups in society to escape their responsibility for producing and perpetuating negative social forces which produce anti-social individuals and groups."³⁰ Whether it is the protagonist embracing neoliberal ideology over racial allegiance, or the customers' varying levels of wheeling-and-dealing in a 'fluid' market place, or the insolvent staff and family seeking work and refuge in the establishment, the characters in *Elmina's Kitchen* constantly draw distinctions between themselves as individuals, using differences within their collective Black identity (British, Jamaican, Grenadian, Ghanaian) as a tool of demarcation, resulting

²⁷ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7000 of 7830]

²⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.63

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.78

³⁰ A. N. Wilson, *Black-on-Black Violence: The Psychodynamics Of Black Self-annihilation In Service Of White Domination* (Afrikan World Infosystems, 1990) p.13

in a deadly conflict that is ultimately driven by the economic competition and individualism that is at the heart of neoliberalism.

For the final chapter, I make a departure from focusing solely on the interaction between race and class. The initial chapters explore how male-dominated places of work in the neoliberal world order create racialised tensions in UK Brown and Black diasporic communities. In Sabrina Mahfouz's *Chef* (2015) both form and range of content differ substantially from *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Elmina's Kitchen*, which are essentially works of naturalism (although *Laundrette* does have strong symbolic throughline). *Chef* is a lyrical monologue that portrays the life of a young cuisinier, whose passion for food and neoliberal ambition to own her own Michelin-star restaurant are waylaid when she is imprisoned for helping her abusive, terminally-ill father take his own life. Working in the prison kitchen, she is then held responsible for the death of one of her emotionally-scarred apprentices, who uses a knife from the kitchen to take her own life. Through interviews with the author and in reference to her other work, I raise questions not only about authorial intention in the writing itself, but also the pitfalls in production choices, particularly her ambition to avoid the "lazy and racist casting scenarios"³¹ that she experienced in her past work. A prime example is her use of the early stage direction, stating that the solo performer is a chef and female but can be of *any ethnicity*,³² which challenges preconceived ideas about casting in British theatre by reinforcing the fact that "Whiteness is not an assumption; it's a racial identity."³³ This confounds dominant ways of thinking that do not, or cannot see that "Englishness is just another ethnicity."³⁴ Through Mahfouz's casting choice of Jade Anouka - a Black, bisexual performer - she creates multiple layers of meaning which I investigate through an intersectional reading of the performance, observing that the contemporary (often privatised) prison system in the UK, is dictated by patriarchal forces that favour neoliberal practices of 'performance management' and 'efficiency' over the value of human life. In conclusion,

³¹ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz. [Accessed 23rd August, 2020]

³² S. Mahfouz, *Chef* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015) p.3

³³ C. Trieschmann, 'Tips for writing characters descriptions' in *Playwrights' Center* (August 15th, 2017) [online]. [Accessed 1st June 2022] Available at: <https://www.pwcenter.org/playwriting-toolkit/tips-writing-character-descriptions>

³⁴ A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora; Contesting Identities* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1996) p.206

the reading offers possible antidotes to the rampant neoliberalism that is destroying public services such as the prison system, through collective action and an ‘ethics of care’.

It is worth noting that these are not exclusively stage plays (*My Beautiful Laundrette* is a screenplay) however, choosing appropriate case studies was not an easy task, as discussed further in the conclusion. This is mainly because the pool of resources for such material, as rich as it was, was somewhat shallow, to say the least. Throughout the thesis, examples are highlighted that relate to the historic challenges that non-White artists practicing in the West have had in establishing a ‘continuum’ or ‘body of work’. This also relates to work by critics of colour, who through different culturally-specific literary practices, often find themselves either rejected or restricted by the constraints of Western academia. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak theorises that the subaltern, historically bereft of resources, often operates through the practice of bricolage i.e. using whatever is to hand to create either a means to live or, indeed, a meaning to life, where “radical proto-deconstructive *cultural* practice instructs us precisely to work through *bricolage*, to “reconstellate” cultural items by wrenching them out of their assigned function.”³⁵ Spivak utilises bricolage on the profoundest of levels, in the deconstruction of language, but this is not a suggestion that the following thesis is “radical” in any such way. This is simply an acknowledgement that my source material is quite far ranging - from stage plays to screenplays, or citations from Robert J. C. Young to Chaka Khan – because often the lyrics of an 80’s pop song are closer to the experience of myself and the writers discussed, and would galvanise my arguments more than any critical race theorist could.

The texts I have chosen do not respond to the outcome of the interaction between race, class and gender in simple ways, but do so in very complex, sometimes tortuous and even troubled, or troubling, ways. Race and racism are central to neoliberalism even though it pretends that they are not by promoting an ideology of hyper-individualism, but in looking behind that ideology we can see race and racism ‘at work’ in the neoliberal order, though the work it is pressed to do is very complex and complicating. Ultimately, far from there being “no race question” in neoliberal society, as Nasser

³⁵ G. C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Kindle Edition, Routledge Classics, 2012) [Location 4705 of 8658]

states in *Laundrette*, I will show that race (along with other marginalised identities) is employed by neoliberalism in the form of competition between and within societal groups. Finally, I will consider how intersectionality creates nuances in received notions of identity, investigating how intersectionality highlights that women of colour “experience double-discrimination”³⁶ in the workplace, and that when adding sexuality to the ‘mix’ it results in multiple points of oppression. However, as a potential antidote to neoliberal (govern)mentality, intersectionality reinforces Hall’s idea that “cultural identity is always something, but it is never just one thing: such identities are always open, complex, under construction, taking part in an unfinished game.”³⁷ leaving space for the possibility of creating ‘new ground’ on which to resist divisive, neoliberal ideology.

³⁶ K. Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’ in *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989) p.149

³⁷ Hall, *The Fateful Triangle* [Location 2005 of 3058]

Chapter 1

'Stubborn stains' and 'ground-in dirt' in Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*: the negation of the of the neoliberal subject

This opening chapter explores how Hanif Kureishi's first, major debut screenplay, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) portrays the lives of first- and second-generation Pakistani immigrants, attempting to forge a new existence in Margaret Thatcher's Britain in the early 1980s. Recovering from major recessions both in the UK and the US in the 1970s and in response to welfarism, Thatcher and Reagan declared a new world order early in their leadership roles, by implementing radical economic policies that would see less state regulation of private business, with the eventual promise of greater individual freedoms. This 'new' economic revolution was termed neoliberalism, and seemingly all were invited to prosper in a lush utopia, regardless of their background. The only prerequisite was that individuals adhere to the ideology of entrepreneurialism, adopt the identity of entrepreneur, with the goal of making each member of society a neoliberal subject (neo-subject). Therefore, we can locate the rise of the neo-subject in this period of socio-economic history, which we know as the 'great turn'.³⁸

Dardot and Laval claim that the late 1970s and early 1980s was characterised by a 'great turn' in the West, which saw neoliberal policies and changes in capitalism support one another to create a new direction for the economy.³⁹ This was, in large part, an economic and social response to the predicament that had been precipitated by both the old Fordist mode of production, alongside the implementation of a Keynesian model of macroeconomics.⁴⁰ In 1908, Henry Ford began producing the Model T, whereby standardisation of production on an assembly line that utilised specialised tools and equipment with unskilled labour, created a high output of productivity (mass production), which

³⁸ P. Dardot, C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal society* (Kindle Edition, Verso, 2013) [Location 6256 of 7830]

³⁹ *Ibid.*, [Location 3593 of 7830]

⁴⁰ These are the two major factors as cited by Dardot and Laval at the beginning of the chapter *The Great Turn* in *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal society*, however they are not the sole factors as they argue there is a continuum between classical liberalism and neoliberalism.

in turn lowered the unit price. This, along with a rise in wages, meant that the workers could afford the automobile they assembled on the production line. This was revolutionary in so far as for the first time in history the automobile became accessible to and eventually could be owned by the masses, and the method was extended to the production of the majority of commercial goods. While Fordism was gaining ground in the 1920s and 1930s, John Maynard Keynes was formulating his theories on macroeconomics. Attempting to reject the classical liberalism of the 19th century, which saw dogmatic *laissez-faire* economics create unfair relations in the market place, Keynes believed that governments needed to intervene in the control of the market especially during times of recession and depression. Dardot and Laval claim that Keynes paved the way for the rise of the welfare state in Europe after the second world war despite his economic thinking being opposed to that of welfarism.⁴¹ However neither of these systems were to last. The models of both the 'private' entrepreneur (Ford) and 'public' minded economist (Keynes) had begun to disintegrate by the 1970s.

Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were the front-runners in the 'great turn' and the implementation of neoliberal policy which was derived mostly (though not in whole) from the outcome of the Walter Lippmann Colloquium (1938), and the Mont Pelerin Society (1947) which was founded by Austrian-British economist Friedrich Hayek.⁴² According to Dardot and Laval, this policy consisted of four principal features:

- 1.) It is a constructivist project, requiring the dynamic involvement of the state and the operation of a specific legal structure, far from the *laissez-faire* market order of the past.
- 2.) Instead this market order arises by claiming *competition* as the universal model for economic practice, rather than the traditional *exchange* system.
- 3.) As it is the state that is responsible for the structuring of this market order, it is also categorically subject to this law of competition.

⁴¹ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 2115 of 7830]

⁴² *Ibid.*, [Location 3388 of 7830]

4.) With competition as its bedrock, 'entrepreneurial governmentality' transgresses the confines of the state and into the self-government of the 'individual-enterprise'.⁴³

For Dardot and Laval, the outcome is the neoliberal subject (neo-subject), an individual who makes all of their choices in life on the basis of competition, and whose relationships with other people are based more on transaction rather than interaction; one who views themselves first and foremost as an entrepreneur, and whose government sees them solely as individual enterprises. The neo-subject is allowed to manifest in several different forms - as devotee, as exploiter, as victim – but they all must share the same commitment. Under this system, the crude categorisation of the human race based on nation, gender, sexuality, ability etc. is no longer economically viable for "the neo-liberal moment is characterized by a homogenisation of the discourse of man around the figure of the enterprise."⁴⁴ This homogenisation implies the rejection (or at least unification) of once monolithic forms of identity such as race, gender, family, sexuality and even class.

The question raised in this chapter is how the rise of the neo-subject - as expressed in Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), and primarily through the character of Omar - either subordinates or reinforces these monolithic identities. First, however, it is necessary to explore how Asian identity interacted with the socio-economic atmosphere in Britain, preceding the birth of modern neoliberalism as outlined above, and therefore predetermining the rise of the Asian entrepreneur.

Setting up shop - an emergent Asian middle-class

Stagflation in the 1970s meant that Fordism had hit its endogenous limits and there was a fall in profitability, due to a slowdown in productivity from both the combative character of wage earners

⁴³ Ibid., [Location 7314 of 7830]

⁴⁴ Ibid., [Location 6251 of 7830]

and by high inflation exacerbated by the 1973 and 1979 oil crises.⁴⁵ Due to the rise in mass production combined with monopoly capital, this 'combative character of wage earners' was not only restricted to Ford or the automotive industry, and neither was it concerned solely with the exploitation of the working classes. In the UK in 1974, Asian workers at Imperial Typewriters (owned by the multinational Litton Industries, based in Delaware in the United States) in Leicester went on strike over poor working conditions. Initially the major issues were around bonus rates, and the expected increase in productivity while wages remained the same. However, "as the strike evolved, a host of related grievances became integral. Moreover, the strike was about racism reflected in the election of shop stewards and the preferential treatment for White workers who could dock in their mates, while Asians were not allowed to do so."⁴⁶ Here is an example of company (economic) policy, which by adhering to a prejudicial set of guidelines, reinforces Asian identity and causes it to 'rise up'. However, despite the strike having a wide-reaching effect for both the company and the workers, they were "mostly one-off things that a combination of Asian leadership and trade union racism had prevented from growing into a movement."⁴⁷ Also, this kind of industrial action was not of any particular concern to the emerging Asian middle class at that time.

In his seminal work *Race, class and the state*, Sivanandan claims that during the post-war decades a clear distinction arises between the ways that the African-Caribbean immigrant population were to be 'assimilated' into British society (see chapter 3), while the Asian immigrant population could be 'integrated' into British society (which could also account for the hierarchy of word order in the ethnographically assigned terms 'British *Asian*' and '*Black* British'). One factor that aided this 'integration' is that a significant proportion of the Asian population carried with them their own culturally-specific, social hierarchies from the mother country, for example, the caste system. The British recognised similarities between such hierarchies and our own class system, so, in this way "the

⁴⁵ Ibid., [Location 3639 of 7830]

⁴⁶ M. Barker, 'The Imperial Typewriters Strike of 1974' in *Thoughts of Leicester Socialist* (August 20th, 2015) [online]. [Accessed 11th April 2018] Available at:

<https://thoughtsofaleicestersocialist.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/the-imperial-typewriters-strike-of-1974/>

⁴⁷ A. Sivanandan, 'Race, class and the state: the black experience in Britain' in *Race and Class*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1976) p.365

strategy of the state in relation to the Asians had been to turn cultural antagonism into cultural pluralism."⁴⁸ The class and the caste system were not the same but with help the Asians could “‘modernize’ their own class hierarchies and social structure”⁴⁹ resulting in enough mutual traits so as to happily coexist. The White and Asian middle classes, through the “pluralism” between these social systems, could share their aspirations for upward social mobility. However, aspirational Asians were not necessarily primarily driven by the desire to work in Thatcher's new market order to get a large slice of the pie, or “squeeze the tits of the system”⁵⁰ as Nasser (Omar's uncle) puts it, rather that they were driven to self-employment because of the “cultural antagonism” they experienced as working-class Asians.

A comparative study in *Asian Self-Employment* attempts to analyse the interaction between culture and economics. The research suggests that the reasons for the increase in Asian self-employment in the late 1970s and the early 1980s can be seen as a response to 'blocked upward mobility', specifically due to underemployment, job dissatisfaction and/or blocked opportunities⁵¹ which arose mostly from racial discrimination. However, the theory of Asian self-employment being an 'economic dead-end', with a meagre income earned in return for long and unsociable working hours is also postulated. The study is not homogenous and highlights the differences in economic success between groups in the Asian community. Self-employment, despite the prospects of long working hours for relatively low pay, was seen as a way out of an oppressive system of work for a great many Asian immigrants who "appeared to suffer more from poor employment prospects and racism at work. These reasons for going into business were put forward by the majority", specifically "Pakistanis".⁵² This suggests that despite the "homogenisation of identity" neoliberals aspire to, identity always remains active in economic reality as much as in culture and society at large.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ H. Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Faber & Faber, Kindle Edition, 2014) [Location 414 of 2608]

⁵¹ T.P. Jones, D. McEvoy, G. Barrett, 'Labour intensive practices in the ethnic minority firm' in J. Atkinson, and D. Storey, *Employment, the small firm and the labour market* (Routledge, 1994) p.186

⁵² H. Metcalf, T. Modood, S. Virdee, *Asian Self-Employment: Integration of culture and economics in England* (Policy Studies Institute, 1996) p.130

Setting up shop was not without its own risks; risks separate from the 'economic dead end' described above. In *My Beautiful Laundrette* we experience an upwardly mobile Pakistani middle-class, forging their way in the new economy, embracing and pivoting on the 'great turn'. At the beginning of the formation of neoliberal society,⁵³ Thatcher declared "Economics is the tool. *The object is to change the soul.*"⁵⁴ Kureishi's work perfectly underscores that "neoliberalism is both the mask and tool of finance"⁵⁵ wherein characters hide behind the facade of entrepreneurialism as the ultimate identity of self, while the protagonist (Omar) wields Thatcher's "tool" of economics, ready to sculpt himself into a neo-subject. However, Omar is surrounded by the 'old' world: his gay fascist lover, his ambitious Pakistani uncle, his disaffected bride-to-be. The question is whether or not neoliberalism as a "mask" or a "tool" can cover up or even chip away at the once monolithic identities portrayed in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, or does it cause them to rise up in more vituperative forms?

On the shop floor - private enterprise and public grievance

"But we are professional business men. Not professional Pakistanis"⁵⁶

Several monolithic identities are explored and challenged in *My Beautiful Laundrette*: race, class, nationalism, gender and sexuality. The screenplay remains an exceptional product of a culmination of initiatives that had been gathering momentum in political forms of criticism in the decades leading up to its conception (postcolonialism, Marxism, feminism, queer theory) in that it skilfully examines the interplay between several of these branches of critical thought, highlighting the overlap between them, and destroying the myth of homogeneity within them. Omar is initially

⁵³ While Dardot and Laval frequently use the terms 'neoliberal policy', 'neoliberal economics' and 'neoliberal ideology' they favour the term 'neoliberal society' as it delineates the fact that "*this* society pertains to a unique form of capitalism that must be analysed as such in its irreducible specificity." Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 265 of 7830]

⁵⁴ M. Thatcher, R. Butt, Interview with *Sunday Times* (May 1st, 1981) [online]. [Accessed 9th April 2018] Available at: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475>

⁵⁵ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 194 of 7830]

⁵⁶ Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* [Location 1417 of 2608]

presented as a young Asian male in a seedy flat caring for his alcoholic, Pakistani father, yet within the first few shots we are presented with a framed photograph of a White female, his mother. What is quickly complicated is Omar's hybrid heritage and the blurring of racial boundaries, representing a rejection of the myth of homogenised, monolithic identities. Hybridity is also alluded to further in *Laundrette* with Salim accusing Omar of being weak because "You've got too much white blood"⁵⁷ and Cherry (Salim's wife) being "sick of hearing about these in-betweens"⁵⁸, although by her own admission she has settled miles from 'home', which she still considers to be Karachi. Although ethnic hybridity can be seen as a factor that could either challenge or add force to neoliberal homogenisation in *Laundrette*, the concept is explored in more detail by Kureishi in later works - for example, in the opening paragraph of the *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) the mixed-race protagonist directly refers to the ambiguity of his Englishness several times - while the focus of this chapter is on the ascension of monolithic identities, not ethnically hybridised ones.

In the opening sequence preceding the revelation of Omar's White mother, we witness Nasser and Salim, Omar's uncle and cousin respectively, evicting tenants from a rented property. This situation in itself is not unique, but what makes it distinctive is the hierarchy of the agents involved. Nasser and Salim (Pakistanis) are in charge, clearly owning the property. They have hired bailiffs of African-Caribbean descent (not specified) as ' heavies ' to extricate White London squatters from the residence "in a filmic reversal of the history of colonialism".⁵⁹ Yet to view this solely as an intersection between race and class, where there is a reversal between the traditional imperial roles of 'wealthy' White and 'enslaved' Black, is an over-simplification. The scene depicts an impoverished White working class being cast out by empowered and (more importantly in this context) employed Black bailiffs, all at the behest of their employers, the upwardly mobile middle-class Pakistanis. The new entrepreneurs. All of this is established within the very first couple of scenes of the screenplay, a clear

⁵⁷ Ibid., [Location 877 of 2608]

⁵⁸ Ibid., [Location 513 of 2608]

⁵⁹ R. K. Gairola, 'Capitalist houses, queer homes: National belonging and transgressive erotics in *My Beautiful Laundrette*' in *South Asian Popular Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (April, 2009) p.43

statement by the author. From the outset, work, business and money, as posited within the neoliberal framework of the hierarchy of competition, subordinates these once monumental racial identities.

The question of self-identity, and the representation of specific groups of individuals in society, is a factor that comes into play in most artistic expression. The interaction between the external (social) and internal (self), the solid and the abstract, and attempts at bridging the gap between the two can be found in a great deal of work by both Black and White (and all shades between) experimental and mainstream artists throughout the 1970s and 80s. This coincided with a time when Black artists were finally given more of a public platform on which to express themselves, which raised a very particular issue of its own. Kobena Mercer asks,

"If, after many years of struggle, you arrive at the threshold of enunciation and are "given" the right to speak, is it not the case that there will be an overwhelming pressure to try and tell the whole story all at once? If there is likely to be only one opportunity to make your voice heard, is it not the case that there will be an intolerable imperative to try and say everything there is to be said, all in one mouthful?"⁶⁰

In his transformative essay *Black Art and the Burden of Representation* Mercer examines several artistic reimaginings of the Black British experience in the 1980s (e.g *Testament* by John Akomfrah, *Handsworth Songs* by Black Audio Collective, *The Body Politic* by Keith Piper) and the ways in which the artists succeed in negotiating their way around or through this *burden* "whereby the Black artist is expected to *speak* for the Black communities as if she or he were its duly appointed public 'representatives'."⁶¹ In Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* there is a seemingly willed intention by the author to *avoid* such a burden by complicating the character's allegiances, not only to the once monolithic identities of race, but also gender and sexuality as "representations of an ethnic group as a monolithic entity inevitably bring about the *disarticulation of diversity* within the group, and silence about the existence of members within the community, like women and homosexuals, who are doubly

⁶⁰ K. Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1994) p.234

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.240

marginalised since discrimination on account of gender and/or sexuality is added to that caused by ethnic difference."⁶²

This type of resistance, whereby non-White artists were actively 'muddying the waters' in terms of representation, was not always whole-heartedly received. The gay relations implied in *Laundrette* alone must have incensed the machismo inherent in the British National Party of the time, but this rejection was not only reserved to the White, Far Right. In fact, a large proportion of the Black community were seen to shy away from these hybrid representations, or expressed a "timidity" about their exposure, not because they were seen as being divisive between racial groups, but rather *within* them. As Mercer notes, among some it was felt that "as Black subjects, we should never discuss our "differences" in public: that we should always defer and delay our criticism by doing our "dirty laundry" in private."⁶³ If we are forced to play out our grievances and conflicts in private just as Omar and his lover Johnny are forced to consecrate their illicit love in the back room of the laundrette, then to whom is it left to bring it into the public eye?

David Edgar is a prominent, White, political playwright whose plays were some of the first to bring issues of race to the stage, during a period that coincided with the emergence of neoliberalism. *Destiny* (1976) foregrounds race as he juxtaposes two different times in British history; 1947 and the twilight of the British Empire in India, and 1976, on the eve of a by-election in the Midlands against the backdrop of an industrial dispute concerning Asian labour, and inspired by the industrial action taken by Asian workers at Imperial Typewriters, as mentioned earlier in the chapter.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Kureishi's stage play *Borderline*, which premiered at the Royal Court in 1981 (a Joint Stock production), looks at the fractures within an Asian community at a time when government and racist groups were mounting pressure externally. In terms of representation, this time in terms of the casting,

⁶² M.C. Pascual, 'My Beautiful Laundrette: hybrid "identity" or the paradox of conflicting identification in "third space" Asian-British cinema of the 1980s' in *Miscelanea: a journal of English and American studies*, Vol. 26 (2002) p.60

⁶³ Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p.238

⁶⁴ David Edgar confirms "it's certain that the strike as it features in the performed version (which was largely written in 1975) drew heavily on a series of strikes in the early 70s ...This included Imperial Typewriters in Leicester (1974)." Email correspondence with David Edgar. [Accessed 24th October, 2019]

Joint Stock managed to avoid the particular *burden* of not having enough 'quality' Asian actors at the time by casting White players in Asian roles "which did not assist their credibility in addressing their Asian subject matter...but crucially neglect[ed] issues of representation and difference."⁶⁵ The point here is not that Edgar *succeeded* in 'fair' representation while Joint Stock *failed*, rather that some Black artists felt an anaesthetizing pressure from either the "burden of representation" or doing their "dirty laundry" in public, submitting representations of the Black experience in Britain to non-Black artists.⁶⁶

My Beautiful Laundrette was bolder than this, as it epitomises the coalescence of different identities within the parameters of an emerging neoliberal framework. The main concept here is identity, and while it is clear that *Laundrette* avoids Mercer's "burden of representation" in terms of some of the identities expressed, other identities within the text are brought to the foreground and hang heavy on the conscience of the reader as Kureishi's "refusal to articulate, through spoken words, a knowable sexual identity instead creates room for issues of race and class to be explicitly articulated by both men"⁶⁷. This is thoroughly explored through status as the middle class/Asian/Omar predominantly occupies positions of dominance over working class/White/Johnny, while the reasons and history behind this master/slave relationship are increasingly hinted at throughout their dialogue "It was bricks and bottles and Union Jacks. It was immigrants out. It was kill us. People we knew. And it was you."⁶⁸ Omar had clearly suffered brutal, racist attacks at the hands of Johnny and his gang, which is something he refuses to forget himself, and is not going to let Johnny forget.

In terms of a neoliberal doctrine, and as outlined in their final chapter "Manufacturing the Neo-Liberal Subject", Dardot and Laval point out that "fixation with identity, whatever its nature, looks like a fall-back position for subjects weary of themselves, for all those who have *abandoned the race* or been *excluded* from it from the outset" (my emphasis, whereby "race" in this context refers to

⁶⁵ D. Hingorani, *British Asian Theatre: Dramaturgy, Process and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p.170

⁶⁶ Fast-forward around 40 years when Sabrina Mahfouz, the playwright that is the focus of the third chapter, insisted they cast actors of Arabic heritage for her play *A History of Water in the Middle East* at the Royal Court in 2019, but only after she "felt experienced enough and right about it enough" to demand appropriate casting. See chapter 3, p.88.

⁶⁷ Gairola, 'Capitalist houses, queer homes', p.46

⁶⁸ Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* [Location 1501 of 2608]

economic upward mobility rather than any ethnic delineation).⁶⁹ Actively avoiding this burden of representation is seemingly a prerequisite for the emerging neo-subject, whose preoccupation with any identity (other than that of entrepreneur) is seen as a negation of their neoliberal ideals. Therefore, Omar's expressions of racial difference should lead us to believe that he is "abandoning the race", as much as Johnny's allegiance to a nationalistic cause is seen as "exclusion" from it. However, Omar uses the business not just as a means of challenging racial dominance, but *reversing* it. As Miles states when referring to Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1964) *reverse* racism may be a consequence of 'White' racism directed towards 'Black' people, but this does not justify it, for it only intensifies the erroneousness of the ideology of racism.⁷⁰ Omar says to Johnny, "I'm not gonna be beat down by this country. When we were at school, you and your lot kicked me all round the place. And what are you doing now? Washing my floor. That's how I like it."⁷¹ Johnny has gone from the dole queue to being gainfully employed because he is rejecting the notion of racial dominance, and accepting the function of the 'individual-enterprise'. Meanwhile Omar uses his entrepreneurialism to reverse the hierarchy and reinforce his newly found racial dominance. The enterprise of the laundrette then acts as a platform onto which his repressed and wounded Asian identity can reposition itself, revealing itself as paramount to Omar's motivation. When Omar employs the kind of dialogue we see above, racial 'reckoning' appears to take precedence over the enterprise itself.

Taking stock - the reconstitution of symbolic forms

The relationships in *Laundrette* are the axis by which the neo-subject is either further realised, or somehow negated. Virtually every sphere of existence in the screenplay is connected to the neoliberal doctrine of work, which in turn pertains to class and, more often than not, race. From the moment Omar is introduced to his future business partners, his cousin Salim and uncle Nasser, Salim begins to

⁶⁹ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7696 of 7830]

⁷⁰ R. Miles, M. Brown, *Racism* (2nd ed.) (Routledge, 2003) p.12

⁷¹ Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* [Location 1835 of 2608]

make the connections between these 'different' camps, "...you'll be with your own people. Not in the dole queue. Mrs. Thatcher will be pleased with me."⁷² By alluding to notions of "own people", "dole" and "Thatcher" Salim, inadvertently or not, makes a connection between racialisation, welfarism and Thatcherite economics respectively. Or, in other words, between racism, class (Marxism) and neoliberalism. The fact that one of his intentions is to "please" the Prime Minister of the time, the very individual who championed and implemented neoliberalism, can be seen as an ideal example of "a 'Lacanian' government" where "the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other."⁷³ Lacan's Other is not a reference to Edward Said's "Other" (the foreign other, both desired *and* derided) rather the Other is the enterprise, or indeed Thatcher's entrepreneurial government cloaked in the enterprise.

According to Lacan, desire is rooted in the Other in two ways; the desire to be recognised by the Other, and the desire to have what the Other lacks.⁷⁴ Salim clearly wants to "please" Mrs. Thatcher, wants recognition from her. He also looks down on people in the "dole queue", scorning the welfare state, while putting the people around him (Omar) to work. In this way he also expresses what the Other lacks; the abolition of the welfare state and the primacy of the neoliberal enterprise. He delineates all of this in terms of his "own people", so once again neoliberalism (and welfarism in this case) is expressed as being subordinate to race, race being the motivating factor for the entrepreneurial spirit.

However, the way in which characters use the neoliberal framework in order to erect monolithic identities is not consistent throughout *Laundrette*. Initially Salim is relatively explicit about the division of races, referring to his "own people" and scorning the "white blood" in Omar's veins, but as the piece progresses, Salim reveals a more universal dehumanising effect of neoliberal mentality. Salim is arguably the ultimate neo-subject portrayed in the film, his house is adorned with expensive postmodern Indian art as well as up-to-date western mod-cons and his business ventures have trekked into the world of the black market (drugs) "People are shit. I give them what they want. I

⁷² Ibid., [Location 314 of 2608]

⁷³ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6273 of 7830]

⁷⁴ M. J. Murray, *Jacques Lacan: A critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2016) p.151-152

don't criticise. I supply. The laws of business apply."⁷⁵ Here there is no racial delineation, the "people" he refers to are simply consumers, and they are "shit". The statement is also loaded with contradiction as he claims not to "criticise". However, this time the motivating factor is the "laws of business".

Through the character of Salim, the monolithic notion of race is rejected, and all that now stands is the bastion of free enterprise and the desire to reach the top, regardless of who is crushed underfoot in the process.

Desire plays an essential role in the formation of the neoliberal society, as do symbolic forms. The outcome of Omar's fate is indicated and influenced by the characters that encircle him, as he is guided onward by the experienced hand of his uncle Nasser. Salim is as much the neo-subject that Omar is meant to aspire to, as Tania (Nasser's daughter) is the 'ideal' marriage partner he is being set up for. Tania also has agency of her own, and displays resistance to this brave new world in the choices that she makes throughout. One of the more stark and challenging utterances comes from her when she declares to Omar "Families, I hate families."⁷⁶ The neoliberal policies implemented by Thatcher were to be reinforced by the symbolic triad of monogamous marriage (family), belief in God (courage), spirit of free enterprise (work), which were seen as "the three pillars of prosperity once we are rid of the social aid that destroys family, courage and work."⁷⁷ However, as Tania iterates, it is not "social aid" that destroys families but the neoliberal world she finds herself in. Her expression of contempt comes just after a conversation with Omar about her father's affair with his White mistress Rachel, a glamorous icon of the 80s new world order. This "hatred" therefore might not be read as being directed towards "families" but rather as a breakdown in familial relations, as brought about by the neoliberal world order, in which neo-subjects like Nasser are "one day...invited to change cars, the next *to change partners*, the next their identity...in accordance with the mechanisms of satisfaction and dissatisfaction." [my emphasis].⁷⁸ And just as Tania expresses her rejection of the family unit, so Nasser expresses his rejection of religion. "But that county has been sodomised by

⁷⁵ Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* [Location 2217 of 2608]

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, [Location 633 of 2608]

⁷⁷ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 3934 of 7830]

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, [Location 6986 of 7830]

religion. It is beginning to interfere with the making of money. Compared with everywhere, it is a little heaven here."⁷⁹ The symbolic "pillar of prosperity" of courage (faith) is not challenged by the welfare state, but replaced with the neoliberal becoming, as Nasser likens the free-market environment in England to "a little heaven".

The destruction, or rather, reconstitution of symbolic forms is something that philosophers, sociologists and economists regard with careful scrutiny. Those symbolic forms took the shape of family, courage and work when Thatcher put forward her new economic policies during the 'great turn' of the early 1980s. However, as Ulrich Beck has pointed out in his work *The Risk Society* "advanced capitalism is essentially destructive of the collective dimension of existence. It destroys not only the traditional structures that preceded it – in the first instance, the family – but also the structures which it helped create, such as social classes."⁸⁰ Although the ideology of neoliberalism emphasises family symbolically, its *logic* is founded on an absolute individualism that destroys any relationships not based on market relations and monetised value. Therefore Thatcher's 'championing' of the family within the neoliberal framework is complex and ambivalent. Beck also alludes to the destruction of the structure of social classes. In *Laundrette* social classes are conceptually challenged, but also clearly demarcated, as discussed earlier in reference to the bailiffs in the opening sequence. In today's economic global environment there are much clearer examples of the creation of new social classes (university graduates working in call centres, living away from home but relying on the 'bank of mum and dad') however these had not come about at the turn of the 80s and the epoch of *Laundrette*. The new social class that arose and is represented in the film is the Asian entrepreneur. However, the price to be paid for this ascension was the negation of traditional values. And the long-term risk, as put forward by Deleuze, Guattari and Lacan, was that "capitalist discourse brings about mass psychosis by destroying symbolic forms."⁸¹ Paradoxically, Thatcher's first two "pillars of

⁷⁹ Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* [Location 2434 of 2608]

⁸⁰ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6644 of 7830]

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, [Location 7011 of 7830]

prosperity", that of family and religion (courage), are unbalanced and toppled by the ever bloating third pillar, that of free enterprise.

All the relationships in *Laundrette*, whether germinating or disintegrating, are circumscribed by work – with race often acting as the catalyst. Genghis (pitched more as 'barbaric invaded' rather than 'barbaric invader', as the historical references to his name would suggest) is angry with his old friend Johnny for his subservience to Omar, unable to understand how he is "grovelling to Pakis"⁸² who the English brought over to work on their behalf, not the other way around. Meanwhile Nasser rebukes Omar for employing Johnny, not because of Johnny's racist past, but because of Nasser's dominant position in the present "No one works without my permission."⁸³ However it is hard not to believe there is some sense of revenge, though possibly unconscious, as the glint in Nasser's eye reveals a certain satisfaction in restricting the work of the White, racist population. In terms of psychoanalytic thought, Freudian analysis claims that Nasser is trying (and failing) to repress his desire to dominate the White population through the mechanics of business, just as Omar cannot hide his repressed desire to subordinate his ex-fascist lover as he relishes him cleaning his floor.⁸⁴ However much neoliberalism seeks to strip away all aspects of collective life, all forms of collective identity (which people "fall-back" on when they are "weary of themselves"), it in fact merely represses them. Then the return of the repressed emerges in stronger, more virulent forms of identity politics, such as nativism and racism (as exemplified more recently with rise to presidency of Donald Trump in the U.S.A., and the vote to leave the E.U. in the U.K.) and as expressed in *My Beautiful Laundrette* through the power play that is implied between racial groups.

The relationship between Omar and Johnny is central, persistently challenged and constantly at risk throughout the film, more so than the laundrette itself. It is the emergence of Omar as a neo-subject that brings them together again in the first place, as Omar employs Johnny to help reinvent the laundrette. Omar not only employs Johnny as a painter/decorator, but also as a member of the White

⁸² Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* [Location 1290 of 2608]

⁸³ *Ibid.*, [Location 1188 of 2608]

⁸⁴ J. Lear, *Freud* (Routledge, 2005) p.108

underclass that can shift narcotics that Omar steals from his cousin Salim highlighting "that even members of the oppressed racial groups are equally capable of class-based exploitations."⁸⁵ Omar engages working-class Johnny as menial worker, keeping him to heel through their financial, emotional and sexual entanglement. He also employs Johnny as drug runner and thief, as they steal electronic equipment from an Asian home. This denotes another quality of the implementation of a neoliberal economics as it "induces in the subject not only a 'fluidity' of ideals, but also a phantasy of omnipotence over things and beings"⁸⁶. Omar's "ideals" have become 'fluid' as both he and Johnny have resorted to drug dealing and theft to keep the laundrette in business, even effectively gagging a young Asian girl from the household who witnesses the robbery. The "omnipotence over things and beings" is underscored by Nasser's "permission to work" and Omar's vengeful pleasure at having Johnny cleaning his floors, as well as doing his 'dirty' work to keep the business up and running.

Even Johnny does not escape the label of neo-subject as he submits himself to the performance/pleasure apparatus that is at the heart of modern management. Desire is one of neoliberalism's core paradigms, and the fact that Omar is both his boss and his lover (a source of income, affection and sexual gratification) transforms Johnny into a neo-subject whose subjectivity is complicit with the activity he is being asked to perform.⁸⁷ Once again the desire of self is the desire of the Other i.e. the desire of the enterprise. For her part, Tania is the only non-White character that seems to resist the neoliberal world order. She acts as an axis and antithesis to it by rejecting both Omar as potential spouse and Nasser as an unfaithful father, packing her bags and making the decision to remove herself from the neoliberal equation. One minute she stands on the train platform, the next she literally disappears behind a passing train, representing "a disavowal of those institutions through a migration into the unknown."⁸⁸ However, this protestation through absence neutralises a great deal of her agency. Her resistance is, ultimately, symbolic.

⁸⁵ H. Kalsoom, 'Portrayal of Ambivalent Selves in Hanif Kureishi's Narrative' in *ELF Annual Research Journal*, Vol. 17 (2015) p.228

⁸⁶ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7000 of 7830]

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, [Location 6262 of 7830]

⁸⁸ Gairola, 'Capitalist houses, queer homes', p.39

Neoliberal society champions individualism, destroying traditional symbolic forms and claims to strip back collective identities. This paves the way for the return of the repressed, whereby these monolithic identities return in more virulent forms. In *My Beautiful Laundrette* this is true of race, class and occasionally gender, which are very much in the foreground, with allegiances to these 'groups' being explicitly expressed between the characters. However, portrayals of homosexuality are made explicit for the audience but not between the characters, the result being that Omar and Johnny's illicit relations often expresses a more ambiguous connection between sexuality and neoliberalism. The spaces in and around the laundrette itself are very clearly defined, while gestures blur the boundaries. Outside the front, Johnny's old racist comrades situate themselves, skulking about, their behaviours both threatening and impotent. This macho, heterosexual environment is made ambiguous as Johnny subtly licks Omar's neck in full view of his fascist friends but without them seeing. Inside the laundrette, this queer expression of resistance is not always obvious as "the *pastel colours* inside and on the washing machines are conveniently associated with male homosexuals as well, as these are not considered "masculine" colours by the heterosexist ideology that tends to conflate and confuse categories of gender and sexuality."⁸⁹ Again, what the heteronormative public would consider to be a 'straight' space is being manipulated by design and gesture, but does this resistance to heteronormativity equate to a resistance to neoliberalism? Neoliberalism can be seen to challenge and even disintegrate traditional orthodoxies such as family (as argued earlier, with reference to the character of Tania) and community (such as ethnic/racial communities), much as homosexuality was perceived to do the same in the 1980s⁹⁰, but the difference was that one ideology was championed while the other remained taboo. The back room is where Omar and Johnny are free to express their sexuality, a private space with the addition of a one-way mirror allowing them to see but not be seen. This is where Johnny and Omar as a gay couple have power, both separate from the business (and therefore the neoliberal world) as well as at the heart of it.

⁸⁹ Pascual, *My Beautiful Laundrette*: hybrid "identity", p.64

⁹⁰ A great deal has changed over the past four decades with gay communities not only becoming more visible, but also with the legalisation of same-sex couples to be allowed to adopt and have families of their own.

How much this power can be shared, when it is a result of individual enterprise, is a question that remains at the denouement of the drama. "We have not emerged from the 'iron cage' of the capitalist economy[...]in some respects it would have to be said that everyone is enjoined to construct their own individual little 'iron cage'."⁹¹ The final scene of the film depicts Johnny and Omar half undressed, standing around the sink in the back room, playfully splashing each other with water. The laundrette has been destroyed by Johnny's old friends but his and Omar's relationship remains intact. The non-verbal scene resembles the analogy of two birds washing themselves at a bird bath, juxtaposed against, and free from the "individual little 'iron cages'" that Dardot and Laval refer to above. As the Laundrette lies in ruins and with no customers remaining, these two appear to have escaped the great cage of neoliberalism, as well as their "individual little 'iron cages'", if only for this brief instance.

Conclusion

My Beautiful Laundrette undoubtedly highlights the pitfalls and false promises of the neoliberal policies implemented by Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative government in the early 1980s. However, does it succeed in the sense that it "filmically protested the free-market policies of Thatcher that contributed to racial unrest and domestic poverty"⁹² especially considering the choices and actions that Omar takes as the protagonist? In *Borderline*, one of Kureishi's earlier stage plays, the issue of racial unrest is also explored, although this time more directly through militant Asian characters who stand up to the racist onslaught that was experienced by Asian communities in the early eighties. The character of Haroon in *Borderline* (1981) does not quite fit this profile, he appears to be more for conforming than resisting. It is only at the end of the play that he reveals his true intentions as "The black mole under the lawns and asphalt of England."⁹³ The implication here is that

⁹¹ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6325 of 7830]

⁹² Gairola, 'Capitalist houses, queer homes', p.41

⁹³ H. Kureishi, *Outskirts and Other Plays*. (Faber & Faber, 1992) p.159

he will become part of the system and bring it down from the inside. Omar also wishes to become part of the system, but he has no intention of bringing the neoliberal world crashing down. He wants his own lawn, and like his cousin Salim, his own Mercedes to drive on the asphalt of England. However, he also expresses pride in being Pakistani, and reveals the resentment that has built up for those that rejected this aspect of his identity as he was growing up, by seeking retribution through the status that he acquires in an emerging neoliberal society. Thatcher's "free-market policies" afford him the chance at financial success, which allows him (and other Pakistanis in the film) to flip the bias of racial hierarchy in their favour – albeit a *contingent* flip, a reversal that is limited to their own sphere or set of relations, rather than a *structural* one.

There are multiple manifestations of the neo-subject in *My Beautiful Laundrette*; Salim as the exploiter figure, Nasser as the conscious evangelistic capitalist adherent, Tania and Johnny as the victims, Omar as the unthinking/accepting advocate. However, the representation of Omar as a budding neo-subject and how he conforms to the neoliberal framework, as well as how he conflicts with it, is in constant negotiation throughout the story. Regardless of how much he might try to resist this new world order, he is always defined within the parameters of the neoliberal framework because, in the words of the author, "if you were in any sense a Third Worlder, you could either envy Western ideals and aspire to them, or you could envy and reject them. Either way, you could only make a life in relation to them."⁹⁴ What Kureishi highlights is that "envy", the state of generalised competition that is at the heart of neoliberal economic policy⁹⁵, is now a constant parameter by which all things are measured. This state of generalised competition can often give rise to very specific, monolithic, racialised identities, which in turn negate the primacy of Omar's new found identity as neo-subject.

⁹⁴ R. Ranasinha, 'Racialized masculinities and postcolonial critique in contemporary British Asian male-authored texts' in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2009) p.304

⁹⁵ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7422 of 7830]

Chapter 2

Troubled representation in the ‘pressure cooker’ of Kwame Kwei-Armah’s *Elmina’s Kitchen*: authenticity, hybridity and mimicry in neoliberal society

“Boy, ain’t nobody studying you.”⁹⁶

Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle, often referred to as the 20th Century Cycle, are ten stage plays set in each decade of the 20th century. The quote above appears, in some minor variation, in each of those ten plays. Different characters utter the phrase in a variety of contexts, and at different points in Wilson’s documentation of the Black American experience across this century.⁹⁷ This line of dialogue, and its variants, is a repeating motif that appears to allude to a higher meaning for the author. The syntax itself highlights a vernacular, a certain mode of speech derived from a geographic area, or a specific section of society that Wilson was known to glean his stories from “by listening to ordinary people speaking on the streets...which would form the foundation for his later work in drama.”⁹⁸ He would venture out into his own, Black communities in Pittsburgh and listen to the way people verbalised, those particular patterns and syntactic tics that create these unique utterances which result in the “seminal elements of Wilson’s plays [that] pay homage to the people of the Hill District. The working-class and heavily African-American neighbourhood next to downtown.”⁹⁹ Subaltern societies, and the writers that spring from them, often take (adopt) the English language, the language of the masters, and deform and reform (adapt) it in such a way as to make it their own (adept). The adaption of the second and third words in the initial quote embody this notion, by converting “there isn’t anybody” to “ain’t nobody”, the utterance of which carries far greater meaning than a simple linguistic contraction as this adopted language is “always written out of a tension between the abrogation of the received English which speaks from the centre, and an act of appropriation which it

⁹⁶ A. Wilson, *Jitney*. (Nick Hern Books, 2001) p.4

⁹⁷ E. Q. Tignor, ‘The Emerging August Wilson – from Poet to Playwright’ in *The College Language Association Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (September, 2007) P.26

⁹⁸ P. M. Gantt, ‘Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle’ in *College Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring, 2009) p.4

⁹⁹ J. L. Dorman, ‘August Wilson’s Pittsburgh’ in *The New York Times* (August 15th, 2017) [online]. [Accessed 12th November 2019] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/travel/august-wilsons-pittsburgh.html>

brings under the influence of the vernacular tongue”¹⁰⁰ Wilson was not the only Black writer to do this, and with this very phrase, and neither was it restricted to the literary arts.¹⁰¹

The use of the word “studying” in the line of dialogue draws particular interest. Wilson’s characters utter these lines in front of an audience, where they are being nothing but studied. Yet there is more to the author’s dogmatic repetition of this expression in each of his plays, more than a wry observation of his own ‘studying’ of the people of Pittsburgh to reify these turns of phrases, and more than a tip-of-the-hat towards the notion of theatre being an anthropological study in itself. Wilson wrote the Pittsburgh Cycle as a testimony that “puts a Black face on the 20th century and demands study to value further the souls of Black folk.”¹⁰² Here, Wilson’s true meaning of the word “study” is expressed. At school I learned Shakespeare, Sherriff and Shaffer, the ‘great’ English playwrights. At university it was Dario Fo, Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov as well as others, but mostly the European ‘masters’. It was not until actively seeking out playwrights that seemingly exist outside of the Western canon – such as Kureishi, Kwei-Armah, Mahfouz – that I recognised voices and situations that often resonated more profoundly than the ‘esteemed’ European writers that I was weaned on throughout my education. It was only then that I decided to put pen to paper myself. The formation of the Western literary canon has resulted in certain voices being marginalised, or at least under/misrepresented as “this cultural hegemony has been maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity, and through attitudes to postcolonial literatures which identify them as isolated national off-shoots of English literature, and which therefore relegate them to marginal and subordinate positions.”¹⁰³ On top of this, the margins often remain invisible unless they are highlighted, even to those of us that exist within them. Many post-colonial playwrights start writing because of a lack of representation based on their lived experience. They start writing out of

¹⁰⁰ B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (2nd ed.) (Routledge, 2002) p.38

¹⁰¹ C. Khan & Rufus, ‘Ain’t Nobody’ on *Stompin’ at the Savoy* (Warner Bros., 1983)

¹⁰² R. N. Blackburn, ‘Erupting Thunder: Race and Class in the 20th Century Plays of August Wilson’ in *Socialism and Democracy online*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter-Spring, 2003) [online]. [Accessed 12th November 2019] Available at: <https://sdonline.org/issue/33/erupting-thunder-race-and-class-20th-century-plays-august-wilson>

¹⁰³ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p.7

frustration that they are not seeing their stories on stage. We write because there ain't nobody studying us.

This chapter examines how workplace dramas represent the ways in which, at the turn of the millennium, a more established neoliberal ideology employs postcolonial phenomena - such as authenticity, hybridity and mimicry - for its own ends, resulting in discord *within* racialised groups. Dominant (White) systems of representation appear to side-line and subordinate representations 'from within' these othered identities as it fragments or "splits" them, by limiting the scope for non-dominant communities and cultures (and therefore writers) from representing themselves, and therefore foreclosing their ability to represent themselves more 'fully'. As Bhabha highlights "Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveals the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body."¹⁰⁴ This is not to say that critics or writers from the Western canon are inherently "racist", but it maybe highlights the "phobic myth" of there being any such thing as a Western canon, as much as there is an "undifferentiated white body". Writers from dominant groups seemingly hold onto this 'myth of wholeness' and in a variety of ways, for example, by not speaking about race but only of 'universal human' concerns. Post-colonial critic and writer, Franz Fanon, offers a strong antidote to this supercilious notion of the 'universal' when he questions Freudian psychoanalyses, disrupting it with his own theory of *proper time, proper place*, more of which will be discussed later. David Marriott, Black poet and scholar, also makes an appeal to "refuse all such opinions, or any distinct (universalist pretence) white doctrine" as he highlights that

"Too many leading critics act as if Black poetry does not exist, as if it were nothing...these critics know (the delusion of a conviction unredeemed by irony) what poetry is and much of Black poetry is not 'it'. The racial piety of this criticism confirms the exclusionary history it

¹⁰⁴ H. K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2004) p.131

narrates. It provides no definition of its value but nevertheless claims that it is concerned with nothing but the making of poems.”¹⁰⁵

In the hope of providing some “definition of its value” and in reference to the postcolonial imperative of his work as “decentering and reconceptualising identity”, Ramey quotes experimental, Black poet Anthony Joseph as trying to “[c]onstruct a self-sufficient universe of text...a body of work with a sense of continuity and cohesion.”¹⁰⁶ Wilson’s cycle is as close to a “universe of text” that achieves this “continuity and cohesion” as is conceivable for an African American playwright in the late 20th century, as it has attempted (to both great critical and commercial success) to document the Black American experience in each decade of the 20th century. At least half of the ten plays in the Pittsburgh Cycle are set in the workplace, while most of the other half revolve around the pressure of finding work and making a living for African Americans in the 20th century. Kwame Kwei-Armah is a Black British playwright of Grenadian/Ghanaian descent, who has garnered recognition for his representation of the Black British experience in his early 21st century triptych; *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003), *Fix Up* (2004), *Statement of Regret* (2007). These three workplace plays (set in a West Indian takeaway, a Black history bookstore and a Black policy think tank, respectively) were deeply inspired by Wilson’s Cycle¹⁰⁷ and constitute an attempt “to chronicle the Black British experience”¹⁰⁸ at the turn of the 21st century. *Elmina’s Kitchen* is the first of this triptych and will be at the heart of this analysis, while drawing on the work of others (including my own) and Wilson’s work. Kwei-Armah uses the work environment, Black business, as a platform on which his characters play out their hopes and fears, aspirations and grievances of the “Black British experience” in the early 21st century Britain.

¹⁰⁵ P. Boxall et al, ‘30@30: the future of literary thinking’ in *Textual Practice*, Vol. 30, No. 7 (November, 2016) p.1176

¹⁰⁶ R. V. Arana, L. Ramey, Contemporary Black British Poetry in *Black British Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004) p.124

¹⁰⁷ M. Brewer, L. Goddard, D. Osborne, *Modern and Contemporary Black British Drama* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p.132

¹⁰⁸ M. Wolf, He talks to Black Britain, and the West End Listens in *The New York Times* (June 1st. 2005) [online]. [Accessed 6th August 2022] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/01/theater/newsandfeatures/he-talks-of-black-britain-and-the-west-end-listens.html?searchResultPosition=1>

It is the notion of the authentic experience of alterity, existing under the pressures exerted by a neoliberal society, an authenticity constantly disrupted by racialised mimicry and market hybridisation, that I will argue eventually leads to intra-racial conflict and the fatal denouement in *Elmina's Kitchen*.

Whose kitchen? – tools of the slave that build the (neoliberal) master's house

Elmina's Kitchen is described in the initial stage directions as “a one-notch-above-tacky West Indian food takeaway restaurant in ‘Murder Mile’ Hackney.”¹⁰⁹ The proprietor is Deli, a thirty-four-year-old British Black man, struggling to keep the business afloat while trying to keep his young son (Ashley) away from the allure of a glamourised gangster lifestyle, as embodied by the regular customer and local ‘Top Boy’, Digger. The takeaway is named after Deli’s late mother, whose photograph hangs proudly on the walls of the establishment, her presence constant throughout the play. The name is also a reference to Elmina’s Castle, the first slave depot built on the south coast of Ghana, where lie the roots of the author’s ancestry. The play is a tragedy that deals with the effects of gun crime within London’s Black community at the turn of the millennium. As the setting above suggests, violence was considered a way of life on the “‘Murder Mile’ Hackney”, and the play’s climax depicts Digger shooting Ashley dead in front of his own father. Kwei-Armah uses the time-honoured dramatic device of hinting at this devastating conclusion within the initial stage directions by means of the word “murder”. As well as this, the very first words of dialogue are “You mudder arse!”¹¹⁰, uttered by the verbally mercurial Digger as he reads the tabloids in disbelief. The emphatic use of the word ‘murder’, and its cultural variants, allows us (as readers) to ‘see’ down the spine of the narrative, and therefore predict (unconsciously) this catastrophic finale. However, the answer to the question of who the victim is and who the perpetrator is, is something that is switched and flipped

¹⁰⁹ K. Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen* in *Kwei-Armah Plays: 1* (Bloomsbury, 2009) p.5

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6

throughout, and these dramatic revelations and reversals are played out up to the very final moments. None of the characters (or audience) can identify where the threat is coming from or heading towards. In fact, nobody can be sure of anyone's identity, as characters such as Digger switch between accents depending on who he is doing business with, while Deli holds himself up as a true neoliberal subject of the West, often defending the 'Whites' in front of his Black clientele.

Here the character 'switching' of Digger and the neoliberal (White) identity of Deli point, on the one hand, to their hybridity, and, on the other, to various acts of mimicry "which fix the colonial subject as a 'partial' presence."¹¹¹ In his work on mimicry, Homi K. Bhabha deconstructs the notion of colonial identity by suggesting that mimicry – the phenomenon of the Black man imitating the White Englishman – disrupts colonial discourse by throwing into question the whole notion of Englishness. If a subaltern can adopt English cultural sensibilities, adapt to them and become more adept at being 'English' than the English, then what does it really mean to be English? In turn, mimicry becomes "at once resemblance and menace"¹¹² which in "disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."¹¹³ However, in the racially, hermetically sealed world that is *Elmina's Kitchen* (all characters being of West Indian descent) and with such a tragic finale, which sets out to reflect the reality of this particular time and place, how does this mimicry play out? With no direct representation of the 'Englishman', and on the unshakeable platform of neoliberal ideology, how and why does this 'disruption in authority' manifest itself as intra-racial violence?

In the *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, hybridity is described as being "closely related to terms such as 'mimicry' and 'ambivalence'"¹¹⁴. Bhabha prefers using the term *hybridisation* over hybridity, as he regards it as an ongoing process that challenges "static and essentialist notions of identity of race and nation promoted by colonial discourses" while the "Third Space" that is created by such hybridisation is, according to Bhabha, the true 'location' of culture in heterogenous societies,

¹¹¹ H. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' in *Discipleship: A Special issue on Psychoanalysis*, Vol.28 (Spring, 1984) p.127

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., p.129

¹¹⁴ P. Childs, R. Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Routledge, 2006) p.112

such as the Hackney that is portrayed in *Elmina's Kitchen* at the turn of the 21st century.¹¹⁵ From the outset, *Elmina's Kitchen* is depicted as a constantly hybridising space. In the Prologue a costumed man stands alone playing a “slow lament-sounding concoction of American blues and traditional African music” on a gurkel, a customary African guitar.¹¹⁶ Here the “concoction” of musical forms appears to represent what Bhabha describes as a going “beyond such binaries of power in order to reorganize our sense of the process of identification in the negotiations of cultural politics,” which challenge these “static and essentialist” forms.¹¹⁷ However, before he starts playing “his head moves sharply as if smelling something distasteful.”¹¹⁸ Again, this signals the disastrous outcome of the piece, but it also suggests something about the space as we see it at the beginning of the play.

The walls are adorned with posters that promote Whey and Nephew rum, a traditionally Caribbean brand, although this may be also be a misconception comparable to Fosters and Castlemaine XXXX lager being promoted as the quintessential Australian beer. While on a trip to a playwriting convention in Queensland in 2000, the Australians I mixed with would never choose to drink either as a preference. A brand called Victoria Brown, VB, was the most popular and one I had never heard of back in Britain. In *Elmina's Kitchen* there are also a “series of Budweiser adverts celebrating African heroes.”¹¹⁹ which emphasises that “an American-centered, consumer-orientated culture of Blackness has become prominent.”¹²⁰ However, there is more at play here than the appropriation of Black culture. Budweiser is a U.S. adaptation of a Czech beer which already signals the hybridised formation of a neoliberal global economy that markets products as ‘authentic’ produce of a particular locality when, in fact, they are not. When, in fact, they are deeply hybrid. The gurkel player attempts to “concoct” a new form by mixing the two musical genres, while on the walls surrounding him are images of a top brand beer superimposed over African heroes (although very little detail is given about these posters, I cannot image Martin Luther King Jr. sipping on Budweiser

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.xiv

¹¹⁷ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p.333

¹¹⁸ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.xiv

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ P. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation* (Routledge, 2002) p.xvi

for a marketing campaign). Perhaps this is what the gurkel also player smells, the manner in which advanced capitalism has adopted identity politics and the notion of hybridity, in order to sell big brand products. There is a list of proverbs on the wall, one of which reads “Life is wealth, keep it.”¹²¹

Deli’s entrepreneurial spirit is indicated throughout the text as he constantly attempts to move his business away from the “one-notch-above-tacky” descriptor from the outset, and he often looks to market hybridisation in order to achieve this as it is “true that in our market-oriented world hybridity is a juicy source of profit that neoliberals cannot afford to neglect.”¹²² This is exemplified by the posters of African idols made to hock ‘American’ beer. However, there is also a more organic and celebratory manner in which market hybridisation infiltrates this particular workplace. Early in the action Deli takes a phone order and relays the types of chicken they sell at the establishment: “jerk chicken, curried chicken, fried chicken, brown chicken, stewed chicken, and our new vibe is sweet and sour chicken. Yeah, West Indian style.”¹²³ After another customer orders this hybrid dish, he exclaims “Man, since I’ve put that sweet and sour shit on the menu the phone’s been off the hook.”¹²⁴ Deli already sees the potential of mixing cultures, creating hybridisation in the market in order to profit from these nascent neoliberal tastes, and he exploits this potential as the script progresses. The place gets an Ikea facelift and the name changes when another character (Anastasia) begins to bear some influence. One of the best examples of market hybridisation is when Deli recalls making himself a chicken plantain burger one night at home when he’s got the munchies, as he prepares a sample for Anastasia. Clearly a hit with her, she encourages him to put it on the menu. A little later, when the “man from the council pre-ordered a month’s delivery of plantain burgers for Black history month and paid upfront” it becomes clear that market hybridisation can be a success. Or as Anastasia puts it “West Indian fast food reach.”¹²⁵ Market hybridisation allows Deli and his business to prosper; the ability to change and adapt to the needs of neoliberal society shows that he is “not only more likely to be in tune with an understanding of ‘race’ that derives from diversified market relations, but have also

¹²¹ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.5

¹²² A. Acheraïou, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization* (Springer, 2011) p.180

¹²³ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.8

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.53

helped to re-specify ethnicity exclusively in the contentious cultural terms of life-style and consumer preference.”¹²⁶ Although Deli’s ability to adapt indicates that he has a new “understanding of ‘race’” it is the “contentious cultural terms” by which these racial identities are newly defined, that creates the instability and conflict that lead to the devastating outcome of the play.

As the gurler player retreats into the wings and the lights come up on the action at the start of the play, two characters are initially present – Deli and Digger. Deli’s heritage is not outlined in the stage directions, though it is implied from the name of the takeaway, the music playing on the stereo and the paraphernalia that adorns the walls, that he is of African-Caribbean descent. Digger, on the other hand, is sketched in some detail. Apart from being described as looking like “every bit the ‘bad man’ that he is”, he is also “from Grenada but came to England aged fourteen.”¹²⁷ A first-generation immigrant that has lived in these different cultures, including doing a five-year stint in a New York prison. The result of this is that “Digger’s accent swings from his native Grenadian to hardcore Jamaican to authentic Black London”¹²⁸ which aligns with the concept of the ‘Creole continuum’ indicating “an overlapping of ways of speaking between which individual speakers may move with considerable ease...strategies of code-switching...which achieve the dual result of abrogating the Standard English and appropriating an English as a culturally significant discourse.”¹²⁹ Having established Digger’s itinerant history early on in the stage directions, it is clear that he has cultural ownership over all three of these accents. That it is not only the Black London accent that is “authentic”, but equally credible are the native Grenadian and hardcore Jamaican accents. If this is what Bhabha describes as mimicry and hybridity - in as much as it challenges essentialist notions of identity, exposing all identities as performative and not ‘authentic’, and therefore acts as a disruptive force against the colonial discourse – then who is it that represents the essentialist, ‘authentic’ discourse in the exclusively Black world (in terms on-stage characterisation) of *Elmina’s Kitchen*? The adoption of these three different accents by Digger infers an internationalism that Bhabha claims

¹²⁶ P. Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, p.xiv

¹²⁷ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.4

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p.44-45

manifests a 'Third Space', but unlike the action of 'concocting' American Blues and traditional African music by the gurler player, Digger's accent is seen to 'swing' from one to the other. The reason he 'swings' between these accents is dictated by who he is dealing with. When talking to his cronies or his black-market clients he uses his Grenadian or Jamaican accent, the accent of the slaves. When conversing with Deli he uses his Black London accent which, although is representative of a multicultural London English accent, is the closest of the three accents he adopts to the accent of the slave masters. Commerce dictates Digger's choice of accent, which is differentiated depending on who he is doing business with. And although Deli has an ear for and understands each of Digger's 'modes' of enunciation, Digger both excludes Deli from his slave heritage as well as establishing him as representing the colonial masters, through his choice of accent. On the other hand, Deli saturates the takeaway with examples of market hybridisation. While both of them are involved in very different 'modes' of business, they both act within the parameters of the neoliberal society within which they must operate. From the outset, an uneasy dynamic is set up between these two Black characters as the neoliberal ground on which they stand, the foundations of which have been built on long colonial legacies, begins to exhibit fault lines within their racial heritage. And they are not they only ones.

Anastasia is the only female character in the play and enters the shop responding to the 'Help Wanted' advert in the window. She is viewed by some critics as being a *griot* – a West African historian, storyteller, musician – very much like the gurler player in the opening sequence.¹³⁰ Here is another character, like Digger, who "Although Black British, [also] swings into authentic, full-attitude Jamaican at the drop of a hat"¹³¹, picking and choosing her 'persona' depending on her environment. Once again, here the author uses the word "authentic" but this time it is not to describe a "Black London" accent (as with Digger) but a "full-attitude Jamaican" accent, which begs the question of which one is the "authentic" accent. It is the ability to do this, the ability to 'switch' between received notions of being "authentic" Black, which exposes the performativity of identity and is exactly what

¹³⁰ M. Pearce, *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story* (Routledge, 2017) p.60

¹³¹ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.17

unsettles essentialist or “authentic” notions of identity. Anastasia is the only physical female presence in the play, and she is overtly sexualised both by the male characters and the author himself, as in her initial stage description; “she has the kind of body that most men of colour fantasise about. Big hips and butt, slim waist and full, full breasts.”¹³² The description goes on in this manner, almost unnecessarily, and raises important questions about how the author depicts the only female character in this overtly masculine world of *Elmina’s Kitchen*. It highlights the findings of Nadine Ehlers (through the work of Judith Butler) on performativity and “how racial performativity works and how it is always a relational operation: racial performativity always works within and through the modalities of gender and sexuality, and vice versa, and these categories are constituted through one another.”¹³³ The intersection between race, class and gender in neoliberal society is an area that will be explored in detail in the third chapter. For now, what is important, is that Digger switches his accent depending on who he is doing business with. Anastasia, on the other hand, switches her accent depending on which of the men she is talking to i.e. “full-attitude Jamaican” in response to the more aggressive sexual advances. They are both switching accents in the hermetically sealed Black world of the play. It follows that this performativity is not initiated by the abrogation and appropriation of English in response to an immediate ‘White’ presence. Rather, it is adopted by the Black individuals as they mediate between themselves in a neoliberal environment. The link between the ‘White’ population and neoliberal society will be explored later in the chapter. For now, what we must be wary of is “how the experiences of one sector of the Black British community, when repeatedly portrayed, becomes representative of *the* authentic Black experience.”¹³⁴ In the analysis of Kwei-Armah’s attempts to “chronicle the Black British experience” at the beginning of the 21st century, and when viewing the space itself and the language used in *Elmina’s Kitchen* through the lens of hybridity/mimicry, it becomes clear that there is no single, “authentic” “experience” of being “Black British” in neoliberal society at the turn of the millennium. If, indeed, there ever was.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ N. Ehlers, *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection* (Indiana University Press, 2012) p.64

¹³⁴ L. Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.53-54

Proper time, proper place – contextualising the world of the play

In considering the relationship between coloniser and colonised, in the context of the colonised (Deli) establishing a business (and therefore a life) in the country of the coloniser, Franz Fanon states that “When one approaches a problem as important as that of taking inventory of the possibilities for understanding between two different peoples, one should be doubly careful.”¹³⁵ Although Fanon uses Freudian psychoanalyses as a foundation for a lot of his arguments, he also criticises the lack of variety of Freud’s test subject base (White, European, bourgeois women), which Freud uses to justify his *universal* assumptions regarding the human condition. Fanon argues “One must concede that in some circumstances the socius is more important than the individual.”¹³⁶ The example he employs to illustrate this is of the use of Senegalese soldiers *by the French colonisers* to crush the Malagasy uprising (1947-49) and his analyses of the ensuing nightmares from a sample of the Malagasy population.

“They were “men of color” who nullified the liberation efforts of other “men of color,”...since we know what the archetype of the Senegalese can represent for the Malagasy, the discoveries of Freud are of no use to us here. What must be done is to restore this dream to *its proper time*, and this time is the period during which eighty thousand natives were killed—that is to say, one of every fifty persons in the population; and *to its proper place*, and this place is an island of four million people, at the center of which no real relationship can be established, where dissension breaks out in every direction, where the only masters are lies and demagogy.”¹³⁷

Adopting these ideas of *proper time*, *proper place* and in an attempt to be “doubly careful”, it is important not only to understand both the internal dynamics of the ‘exclusively’ Black world of

¹³⁵ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, 2008) p.61

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.78

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.77

Elmina's Kitchen, but also the broader context in which this world exists and how this encroaches on the 'exclusive' domain of the play. In the previous chapter I attempted to describe *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) in the context of early neoliberalism, around the time of 'The Great Turn' as implemented by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Now I hope to do the same by putting *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003) in the context of the neoliberal policies adopted by Tony Blair and Bill Clinton whereby "they could not help but sustain the process of restoration of class power even against their better instincts"¹³⁸

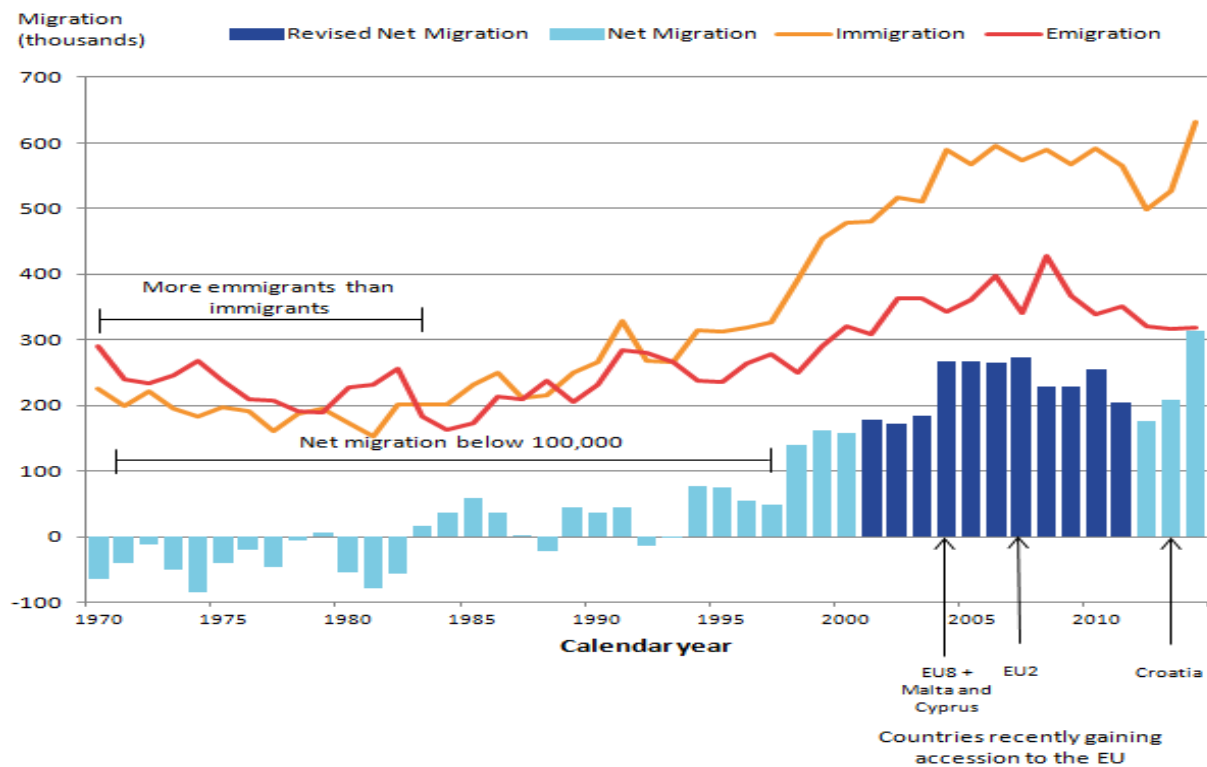


Fig. 1. ¹³⁹

Looking at Fig. 1, there was a hike in immigration in the years leading up to the release of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a contemporary story of Pakistani businessmen finding their way in this brave

¹³⁸ D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p.62-63

¹³⁹ Office for National Statistics, 'Migration Statistics Quarterly Report' *Office for National Statistics* (May, 2006) [online]. [Accessed on 13th November 2019] Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/may2016> [sic] in the graph, *emmigrants* is misspelled and should be spelt *emigrants*.

new economy. As reflected in my own family, it was a prosperous time for the small business entrepreneur. Having fled Iran after the revolution of 1979, my father bought a newsagents in Middlesbrough in 1980. By 1982 he could afford to open a second shop. This prosperity was not to last, but for the sake of this chapter what is important is that the wave post-war of immigrants (and their children) had established their businesses in the cradle of neoliberalism. *Elmina's Kitchen* is set almost twenty years later. This “one-notch-above-tacky West Indian food takeaway” has posters/proverbs/pictures that “litter” the walls, ragga tunes that blare out from the television and regular customers that have an established rapport with the proprietor. The sense is that Deli, and his shop, have been there for some years. On top of this and based on my own experience of writing a play set in my father’s newsagents in Wolverhampton in 1999, it is likely that the author will have been formulating ideas about the script over the several years preceding its final conception/first production. It is therefore probable that Kwame was building the world of *Elmina's Kitchen* from the early/mid 90s onward. According to the statistics illustrated in Fig. 1, this was a time in the UK when immigration was historically low but Black and Asian 'second generation' immigrants, who had set-up shop in the 80s and early 90s, had become more established and begun to work out their sense of belonging. At this time, the neoliberal ideology had also become more established as

Reagan and Thatcher seized on the clues they had (from Chile and New York City) and placed themselves at the head of a class movement that was determined to restore its power. Their genius was to create a legacy and a tradition that tangled subsequent politicians in a web of constraints from which they could not easily escape. Those who followed, like Clinton and Blair, could do little more than continue the good work of neoliberalisation, whether they liked it or not.¹⁴⁰

Despite the variety of strong African and West Indian cultural influences that shape *Elmina's Kitchen* (food, posters, music, vernacular), the external forces of neoliberalism inevitably break through the surface of this hermetically sealed world, as seen initially by the representation of commercialized

¹⁴⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.63

hybridity (e.g. Budweiser/African heroes poster), some of which act positively on the evolution of the business, as will be discussed later in the chapter. However, this market hybridity that superimposes product over culture to create a ‘new’ way of marketing, and a neoliberal ideology that aims to convert everyone (including the likes of Deli) into a neo-subject, are central factors that are integral to the heartbreaking denouement of the story.

There is a difference in the rendering of the characters in *Elmina’s Kitchen* compared to *My Beautiful Launderette*, and as highlighted by Harvey’s quote above, this has a lot to do with class. The Pakistani characters in *My Beautiful Launderette* drive exclusive sports cars, drink and eat in opulent bars and restaurants and adorn the walls of their homes with expensive, post-modern Indian art. In contrast, Deli’s “tacky” takeaway looks like it has seen better days, and business is far from good, as Deli highlights when he laments “Tell me what’s great about this place? I have a handful of customers who spend five pound a shot and talk nonsense!”¹⁴¹ There are no doubt Pakistani businesses that have struggled historically in the UK, and West Indian businesses that have thrived, but these portrayals could point to a more profound socio-political phenomenon that opened up an economic difference between Black and Asian communities settling in post-war Britain. As Sivanandan articulates:

“the concern of integration during this period related more to the Asians than to the West Indians...a people who were industrious and responsible, anxious to educate themselves, prepared to work hard and move up the social economic ladder...virtues which shored up bourgeois society. Besides they too had their creeds and castes and their classes...The West Indians, on the other hand – it had been assumed – were part of British culture, an aspect of it, a sub-culture. They were not a society apart – only their colour was different. They could be *assimilated* (though the word used was ‘integrated’) into the mainstream of British society.”¹⁴² [my emphasis]

¹⁴¹ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.44

¹⁴² ¹⁴² A. Sivanandan, 'Race, class and the state: the black experience in Britain' in *Race and Class*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1976) p.359-360

For the first wave of post-war immigrants, the similarities between the Indian caste system and the British class system meant that the two cultures could often run parallel to each other, even intertwine, making integration possible. The West Indian community did not share any such cultural equivalents “beyond the British educations which were their colonial inheritance, they lacked a single cohesive culture which could bind them together”¹⁴³ so the British government of the time (mid 60s) concluded there was no other choice but to assimilate. However, as Stuart Hall points out “By the end of the 1950s, though it remained an objective of liberal social policy, the strategy of *black assimilation* had already been ruled out, for the great majority of Blacks, as a realistic mode of survival.”¹⁴⁴ It was clear to the Black community that the annihilation of any true expression of West Indian culture would inevitably be part of such inculcation. And this manifested itself as “increasing police harassment, particularly of West Indians, mounting discrimination in employment and housing and the relegation of West Indian children to ESN (Educationally Sub-Normal) schools”¹⁴⁵ This meant the Black community could not even claim ownership of the one thing that could be regarded as integral to the dominant culture, that of the “colonial inheritance” of “British educations”. In the immediate aftermath of the “harassment” and “discrimination”, militancy grew in these Black communities, as they revolted against such prejudice. This was seen to change over the decades leading up to the time of *Elmina’s Kitchen*, especially in the “Black expressive cultures” where it is regarded that “The assimilation of Blacks is not a process of acculturation but of cultural syncretism” especially in terms of fashion, music, style and language.¹⁴⁶ However, the lasting effects of the different ways the Black and Asian communities were ‘incorporated’ into British culture, is reflected in the different ways the characters are portrayed in the Asian *My Beautiful Laundrette* and the Black *Elmina’s Kitchen*, characters who would have grown up with and experienced the phenomenon Sivanandan articulates above - the affluence that can come with an accepted (on both sides) integration (Asian) and the struggle that results in an enforced assimilation (Black). This difference has even found its way into the universal naming of these two groups; British Asians and Black British - Asians are able to

¹⁴³ P. Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (Routledge, 2002) p.211-212

¹⁴⁴ S. Hall et al. *Policing the Crisis : Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.343

¹⁴⁵ Sivanandan, ‘Race, class and the state’, p.361

¹⁴⁶ Bastide quoted in P. Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, p.204

prioritise their 'Britishness' while maintaining their Asian heritage, while the Black community are destined to always be *Black* before they are *British*, which could be a point of pride if considered from within the Black community, but indicates a certain 'second-class Britishness' when you're being viewed from the position of the dominant culture.¹⁴⁷

The result of this is a cultural hierarchy that is expressed throughout *Elmina's Kitchen* in the form of rival businessman and neighbour, Roy. He is an Asian entrepreneur who, during the play and as an offstage presence, attempts to open a West Indian restaurant across the road from Elmina's Kitchen. When Digger finally enlists Ashley (Delis' son) in his illicit work, the first job he gives Ashley is to burn down Roy's restaurant. The situation escalates as Roy is in the property when it is attacked, rushed to hospital with severe burns, and the police are now on Ashley's trail. Before any of this unfolds in the plot, in fact before we are even introduced to Roy's 'presence', there are initial exchanges that indicate this Black/Asian inequality. (It is worth noting that in the 2005 BBC 4 adaptation of *Elmina's Kitchen*, Deli and Roy are seen eyeballing each other across the street in the very first frames of the film. His presence made physical by the fact that the camera can move outside of the single location of the restaurant interior, to which it is limited in the stage play). When Deli takes an order within the first few minutes of the scene, he tells the customer it will be delivered in 45 minutes, Digger retorts "You think an Indian man would do that? That's why the Black man will always be down. He don't know how to analyse his environment."¹⁴⁸ Deli echoes this notion of analysing environment, in order to better his situation as a Black man making a living in Britain, throughout (e.g. "The true sign of intelligence is how man deals with the problems of his environment"¹⁴⁹). However, he and Digger have very different approaches to this notion, with Deli attempting to forge his way in this environment using legitimate means, while Digger adopts criminality. Ashley's murder (by Digger, in front of his father) reflects the stark reality that choosing

¹⁴⁷ It should be noted that, post 9/11 and the backlash against multiculturalism accompanying the 'war on terror', this has now pivoted to the point where it is believed that Asians find it difficult to integrate, whereas Black Britons are seen less problematically in terms of their 'Britishness'. The Black communities continuing exclusion manifests more in a racism that associates their 'race' as being the basis for their being a 'social' problem in terms of poverty, low aspiration, and criminality.

¹⁴⁸ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.9

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.66

the legitimate line does not guarantee a secure future. Yet there is much more to the so-called Black-on-Black violence represented in *Elmina's Kitchen* than it simply being the outcome of Black criminality, for it is the *environment* that Deli is so keen to 'analyse' that is the root cause of such violence.

Black victimhood – *Elmina's Kitchen* and the legacy of slavery

“‘We have entered a stranger’s dream, and for trespassing he has rewarded us with his worst nightmare’ is what my father used to say about living in England”¹⁵⁰

Expressions of Black victimhood, as exemplified by the quote above and Digger’s statement “the Black man will always be down” cited earlier, occur throughout *Elmina's Kitchen*. Anastasia announces early on “You know what I mailed my son last night? I tell him that me walk into a restaurant named after a slave castle but couldn’t see the castle.”¹⁵¹ As it transpires, Anastasia is lying about her son, she has already lost him to gang violence, mirroring the fate of Deli’s son at the climax of the show. Regardless, it is the symbolic interpretation of this line, regarding the link between *Elmina's Kitchen* and *Elmina's Castle*, that is pertinent here. She claims she has walked into “a slave castle but couldn’t see the castle.” On the surface, this remark appears to suggest that Anastasia is merely underwhelmed by the establishment, that this “one-notch-above-tacky” takeaway is anything but a “castle”. However, the subtext of the utterance implies that “a slave castle” without the “castle”, leaves just the “slave”. For Anastasia (and the other characters) the “castle” in *Elmina's Castle* would not conjure the ‘seat of kings’ imagery associated with such places of grandeur, rather a place of incarceration, the first prison of its kind built for the Africans subjugated during the Atlantic slave trade. Yet, without the “castle” the “slave” remains, suggesting that although the Atlantic slave trade ended long ago, there are non-physical or ‘invisible’ structures that keep these characters enslaved.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p.46

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p.20

This could relate to the concept of the ‘invisible hand’ postulated by Adam Smith, one of the forefathers of classical liberalism, also known as “The Father of Capitalism”, who claimed over 250 years ago that the distribution of wealth (by the wealthy) is “led by an invisible hand”¹⁵² The through-line to neoliberalism is apparent when we observe that power “becomes an ‘oblique method’ or ‘indirect legislation’...subjects are led by an ‘invisible hand’ to make the choices that will be advantageous to each and every one of them.”¹⁵³ Consciously or not, Anastasia likens the elusive “castle” to the ‘invisible’ structure of a supposed self-regulating *laissez-faire* neoliberal economy which, in turn, is connotationally linked to the slave trade on which the capitalist economic system was founded. It appears to be directed at Deli, but Digger is also in the restaurant and responds directly to this line with a resounding “Rasclaat!”, so could also be a reference to either man’s ‘enslavement’. It is how this Black victimhood then manifests itself as so-called Black on Black violence, and the way this is mediated by neoliberalism, that I will go on to explore further.

Digger is the sole perpetrator of physical violence directed towards others in this story. He takes his gun out and threatens Deli in the opening pages, he details pistol-whipping clients who owe him money and of course he eventually shoots dead Deli’s son, Ashley. He has the ‘monopoly on violence’ in the world of *Elmina’s Kitchen*, a concept which dates back to Thomas Hobbes’ book *Leviathan* (1651) and is famously re-iterated by Max Weber’s work *Politics as a vocation* (1919), which asserts that only the state has this claim.¹⁵⁴ This is not to suggest that Digger represents the state’s ‘monopoly on violence’, even as a counterpoint to Deli’s position as neo-subject, but it is pertinent when considering either man’s ‘freedom’ and ‘authority’. Deli also exerts a type of undeniable power over Digger (albeit more subtle, possibly even ‘invisible’): that of neoliberal ideology. It is Deli’s takeaway, and he constantly reaffirms this authority by controlling what Digger says (curbing his bad language) and does (demanding he puts away his gun). And there is the constant threat that Deli is going to inform the police of Digger’s clandestine business deals. Wielding any

¹⁵² A. Smith, *Adam Smith: The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge University Press. 2004) p.215

¹⁵³ P. Dardot, C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal society* (Kindle Edition, Verso, 2013) [Location 6227 of 7830]

¹⁵⁴ M. Weber, *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations* (Algora Publishing, 2008) p.156

kind of absolutism, whether it is physical or ideological, establishes a victim/perpetrator dynamic. Much in the way that Miles attempts to conceptually deconstruct racism as an act that “both brutalises and dehumanises its object, and in doing so brutalises and dehumanises those who articulate it.”¹⁵⁵ Deli has ultimate authority over the space, but Digger disrupts this authority in turns and throughout the story. However, Anastasia’s observation of a “slave without a castle” – which could be directed at either Digger or Deli – could also be a reference to what she sees as the fine line between the object and the subject, the victim and the perpetrator, and the dehumanisation that both endure. Much like the characters of Omar and Johnny in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Anastasia reveals that Digger and Deli’s environment, the neoliberal ground on which they operate “tends to confine every subject in the little ‘iron cage’ they have themselves constructed.”¹⁵⁶ A man’s home might be his castle, but *Elmina’s Kitchen*, as the concrete manifestation of neoliberalism could just as easily symbolise Elmina’s castle. A place that threatens incarceration for both Deli and Digger, when in fact, it becomes Ashley’s tomb.

Baygee is another secondary character in the play, described as a “hyper lively old Bajan man...the last of West Indian door-to-door salesman.”¹⁵⁷ When he is not selling fake designer clothes to make a living, he is seen to be gambling, drinking and playing his guitar. Like each of the characters, Baygee has his own take on the present situation, and how it is related to a colonial past. After the television that sits in the corner of the takeaway broadcasts news headlines about a ‘Yardie’ being brought into the UK by the Metropolitan police to fight crime (supposedly within the Black community) alongside news of a massive private pension scandal perpetrated by a Western businessman, Baygee proclaims “My father used to say when a Black man tief, one man cry, when the European dem tief, whole continents bawl.”¹⁵⁸ Baygee may be commenting directly on the current affairs blaring out from the television but the legacy of slavery resonates in this statement, as it does throughout both the entire play and all three of Kwei-Armah’s triptych, which “foregrounds relations

¹⁵⁵ R. Miles, *Racism* (2nd ed.) (Routledge, 2003) p.10

¹⁵⁶ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7612 of 7830]

¹⁵⁷ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.13

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.21

between fathers and their children (mainly sons) to explore how legacies are passed down through generations as a metaphorical allusion for the impact of slavery on the present.”¹⁵⁹ However, as well as Baygee’s statement (and Anastasia’s and Deli’s) harking back to a murky past, they clearly comment on a disparate present and an unstable future. It is clear from Anastasia’s observation of a “slave castle” without the “castle”, Baygee’s comparison between Black and European banditry and Deli’s “stranger’s nightmare” that notions of legacy run deep within this Black community. This is reinforced by the fact that Anastasia claims she is relaying these ideas to her dead son, while both Baygee and Deli are referencing their ‘absent’ fathers. The legacy of the past is unavoidable, but how does it manifest in the present as so-called Black on Black violence and, ultimately, what is the platform on which it is able to operate?

Intra-racial violence – essentialisation within racial groups

In *Black on Black Violence* Amos Wilson advances assertions, made by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that Black-on-Black criminality and violence are socio-political inevitabilities that function to preserve and perpetuate Black self-annihilation in service of White domination.

“The idea of personality as relatively isolated and unreflective of its social interactive history and environment, as merely motivated by purely internal motives, is an illusion. Moreover, such a concept is a dangerous myth and a psychological conspiracy perpetuated by the ruling groups in society to escape their responsibility for producing and perpetuating negative social forces which produce anti-social individuals and groups”¹⁶⁰

The extreme instance of Black-on-Black violence in *Elmina’s Kitchen* (the murder of the protagonist’s son in his own shop, right before his eyes, and perpetrated by another Black man) does not, at least at first glance, appear to have anything to do with White domination. This (the world of

¹⁵⁹ Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights*, p.44

¹⁶⁰ A. N. Wilson, *Black-on-Black Violence: The Psychodynamics Of Black Self-annihilation In Service Of White Domination* (Afrikan World Infosystems, 1990) p.13

the play) is a hermetically sealed world, containing only African/West Indian characters, with an external threat that derives from a rival Asian businessman. There is, seemingly, no White presence. However, the representation of Black victimhood as discussed earlier, is always rooted in a colonial past that relates to the legacy of slavery. And the recollection of this shadow often results in a defensiveness among the characters. Digger is a self-proclaimed gangster, involved in organising young runners to do business for the top yardies in the area. He is mostly involved in the protection racket, eventually employing Ashley to do over Roy's rival shop next door (though Black-on-Asian, an act of Black-on-Black violence in its own right). Baygee, despite selling designer fakes and therefore on the spectrum (though the less extreme end) of the black market, views Digger as a low life and the way he does business as a part of this perpetual Black self-annihilation. "What you do, young white boy, is buy and sell Black souls."¹⁶¹ Baygee refers to Digger as "White boy" from his first entrance, several pages earlier, and it is clearly related to the way he does business. Baygee is chasing up a £20 debt, and Digger offers to buy it off for £15. It is clear to Baygee that Digger is going to make up the £5 disparity (and most likely more) by intimidation and violence. In Baygee's eyes this clearly warrants the label of "White". This, combined with him expressing the sentiment of "when European dem tief, whole continents bawl" suggests the manner in which Baygee has witnessed how "White" business operates in the West, both at this time in history, and as continuum of the legacy of slavery. It is worth noting that in the US there has been a great deal of exposure of the racial bias of subprime mortgage lending during the housing boom, where "banks that once ignored minority communities were now targeting them to make money."¹⁶² There is also evidence that African Americans have not been as successful in recovering from the crisis.¹⁶³ In the UK the 2008 financial crash has caused further divisions, a rise in nationalistic ideas, and most likely been a factor

¹⁶¹ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.21

¹⁶² E. Badger, 'The Dramatic Racial Bias of Subprime Lending During the Housing Boom' in *Citylab* (August 16th, 2013) [online]. [Accessed 13th November 2019] Available at: <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2013/08/Blacks-really-were-targeted-bogus-loans-during-housing-boom/6559/>

¹⁶³ S. Burd-Sharps, R. Rasch, 'Impact of the US Housing Crisis on the Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations' for *Social Science Research Council* (June, 2015) [online]. [Accessed 13th November 2019] Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/ssrc-cdn1/crmuploads/new_publication_3/impact-of-the-us-housing-crisis-on-the-racial-wealth-gap-across-generations.pdf

in the Leave majority of the European referendum in 2016 as “this racializing nationalism has borne a particularly defensive character since the 2008 crisis.”¹⁶⁴

Racial slurs are often used by individuals to denigrate those that are part of ‘out’ groups, in order to reify the position of the individual within the ‘in’ group. Moreover they “may help observers who are members of dominant social groups maintain social inequality, as such inequality increases the opportunity for members of these dominant groups to access valued social resources—such as power, status, and wealth.”¹⁶⁵ But how does that manifest in the hermetically sealed Black world of *Elmina’s Kitchen*? Who is the dominant group, and how does this operate to invert the operation of racial slurs so that it subordinates those who are already subordinated? Digger also falls back on profiling to assert his authority in the takeaway, and often in response to having been profiled himself. When Baygee leaves, after his first appearance, Digger cusses him down as “You British Blacks, boy”, not only referring to Baygee but to Deli as well. Deli responds with “I don’t know why you gots to be dissing us all the time, you been here since you was blasted fourteen, you’re as ‘British’ as the rest of us.”¹⁶⁶ The dubbing of a racial group, as discussed earlier in reference to the disparity between the *Black* British and *British Asian* experience in post-war Britain, is inverted to great effect here. It reflects how the homogenisation of an entire racial group (Black British) can serve to eradicate the multitude of different ethnicities and experiences within that group, leaving that group with a necessity to differentiate from one another, as represented by the different ‘labels’ the Black characters give each other (“British Black”, “White boy”, “rhated Englishman”). Moreover, this labelling that homogenises an entire racial group does not serve to bring that group together, rather it results in the need for individuals in that group to differentiate themselves from one another, often using tools of dominance, derision and violence - the tools of the masters. Stuart Hall is particularly intrigued by the way this type of ‘labelling’ and ‘differentiation’ manifests in the non-White, diasporic communities

¹⁶⁴ S. Virdee, B. McGeever, ‘Racism, Crisis, Brexit’ in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol 41, No. 10 (August, 2017) p.1811

¹⁶⁵ A.S. Rosette et al. ‘Why Do Racial Slurs Remain Prevalent in the Workplace? Integrating Theory on Intergroup Behavior’ in *Articles in Advances*, Vol. 24, No. 5 (Sept., 2013) p.1403

¹⁶⁶ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.16

“how oppressed groups themselves, in acts of seeming self-liberation, inverted these categories without discarding them, instead championing racial or ethnic pride as if they believed that after surviving the lethal effects of essentialization, the most efficacious way to defeat, say, anti-black or anti-brown racism or colonialism was to flip the script, embrace physical differences, and essentialize themselves.”¹⁶⁷

Hall considers how members of the Black and Brown community fall into the trap of essentialising themselves, by embracing categories that differentiate them from the White community. In *Elmina's Kitchen* we see this taken one step further, whereby the characters employ subcategories in order to essentialise themselves, and differentiate themselves from others within the same racial group.

Kwei-Armah often foregrounds these political ideas, as racial profiling is part of the discourse the characters deal in, from the very first lines of the play. Digger opens the dialogue with a West Indian expletive “You mudder arse” which Deli, out of respect for his mother Elmina (whose omnipresence is represented by the photograph of her hanging on the wall), asks him to keep in check. However, when Deli tells Digger to “Fuck off” just a few pages later, Digger retorts with “Oh, it’s alright for you to use all manner of Viking exple, exples, swear word, but as soon as a motherfucker uses language of our heritage you start to cuss. Dat is what I talking about when I cuss you British Blacks.”¹⁶⁸ Digger first uses the accusatory “You British Blacks” in the opening minutes of the play, it is a repeating phrase from this character that clearly demarcates him and differentiates him from the other characters, but it also elevates him to higher status, as does Baygee’s use of “White boy” in reference to Digger. In *Elmina's Kitchen*, the traditional discourse of the racial slur is inverted, whereby individuals from the “subordinate group” (West Indian) use signified terms for the “dominant group” (White English) to “maintain social inequality”. So, although received notions of the racial slur are inverted, they pertain to the same outcome, “the erosion of the institutional frameworks and symbolic structures in which subjects found their place and identity.”¹⁶⁹ This being

¹⁶⁷ S. Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Kindle Edition, 2017) [Location 67 of 3058]

¹⁶⁸ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.10

¹⁶⁹ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6872 of 7830]

one of the governing factors in the construction of neoliberal society and the realisation of the neo-subject.

Deli as the rising neo-subject

Immediately after Digger's "Viking" expletives line his phone rings, and "he switches his accent to hard-core Jamaican"¹⁷⁰ Digger is a mercurial character from the outset, instantly switching from one accent to another, sliding his persona from one locus to another to suit the situation, but clearly expressing that there is something *unauthentic* about being "British Black". Deli's character, on the other hand, is not as easy to pinpoint (there are no such stage directions, as there are for Digger, discerning his origins or his accent). This lends a certain irony as Digger is *defined* as being changeable from the outset of the piece, while Deli *appears* to be more steadfast - a dislike of vulgar language, an ultimate respect for his mother, a concerned father and a legitimate businessman. However, as the piece progresses, Deli begins to reveal more and more of his adopted identity. One of the events that drives (at least the beginning) of the play, is the release of Deli's brother (Dougie) from prison. Deli has attempted to spruce himself and the takeaway up a little. Digger suggests he should have come to him for a loan and done a better job, but Deli tells him that he would rather go to the bank, most likely rejecting Digger's 'blood' money in an act of defiance. Digger laughs "What bank is gonna give you money, nigger?"¹⁷¹ to which Deli replies "Ahhhhh fuck that old school shit Digger. That was some old eighties shit you talking."¹⁷² Despite using the English language in a *disruptive* manner – vulgar language, incorrect grammar, mixing tenses – the tone of the statement is *defensive*. He is pulling Digger up on antiquated (80s) notions of racial prejudice, harking back to a time when banks would not give immigrants business loans. Up to a point Deli has his facts right, since a greater presence of ethnic minority businesses on the UK high street and the demand for

¹⁷⁰ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.10

¹⁷¹ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.26

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p.27

consumer ‘variety’, has led to greater inclusion in neoliberal society, as “identity has become a consumable product.”¹⁷³ Having said this, a 2008 report by the Runnymede Trust revealed that –

- Ethnic minority-owned businesses pay higher bank loan charges than White-owned businesses, on average;
- The gap between the amounts of business finance sought and the amounts agreed is significantly greater for Black African and Pakistani-owned businesses;
- Black African and Black Caribbean owned businesses are much more likely than Indian, Pakistani and White-owned businesses, to be rejected for loans outright;
- Black African and Black Caribbean owned businesses are significantly more likely to feel discouraged from applying for finance than Indian, Pakistani and White-owned businesses.¹⁷⁴

There is evidence here that there is not only a discrepancy between White owned businesses and other ethnic minority owned businesses, but that there is also a disparity between Black owned businesses and those owned by Indians and Pakistanis, with Black owned businesses coming out worse off. So, Digger’s interrogation of bank loans is possibly not as easily relegated to “some old eighties shit” that Deli suggests. It appears that at the root of this statement is the implication that Deli is siding with neoliberal institutions (banks and business) rather than his fellow Black man. It is also true that Deli is looking beyond skin colour and recognises Digger for what he really is; a dangerous and violent loan shark, the ultimate exploiter neo-subject. However, Deli actively silences Digger’s protestations about the inequalities of the Black experience in the past, and by doing so, Deli is not only pulling a veil over the racial injustices of the past but also of the economic racial inequalities in the present.

Deli’s allegiances to the neoliberal world he has found himself in become increasingly apparent as the story unfolds and the stakes begin to rise. Clifton is Deli’s historically absent father, who has returned to welcome his other son (Dougie, Deli’s brother) on the day that he is released from prison. Clifton is a player (he immediately comes-on to Anastasia) and drawn as a somewhat slippery character, but - very much like Baygee, Anastasia and Digger - is also a Black character that

¹⁷³ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6993 of 7830]

¹⁷⁴ O. Khan, ‘Financial Inclusion and Ethnicity: An Agenda for Research and Policy Action’ a *Runnymede Trust Report* (July, 2008) p.30-31 [online]. [Accessed 6th August 2022] Available at: https://assets.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/617be008ff72b2243a23e88b_FinancialInclusion-2008.pdf

has not forgotten the horror and brutality of the past inflicted by the White population. In a conversation with Baygee concerning *obea*, a type of West Indian witchcraft, Clifton decrees that “The most witchcraft is practise by the white man. How do the arse you think he managed to take Africa from we. That white man - ” but Deli sharply cuts him off “Don’t bring none of your white this and dat in here, Clifton. I don’t want to hear it.”¹⁷⁵ Again, the defensive tone of Deli’s statement is immediately apparent, but this utterance goes further than the statement about the bank loan. Not only does he include the racial group “White”, but he also brings his territory, his *environment* “in here”, into that defence. This is not the only time Deli’s ‘new’ ideology clashes with Clifton’s bold declarations. In Act Two Clifton ad libs a song about football, specifically the striker Clive Best, who played for West Ham between 1968 and 1976, chanting such lyrics as “Clive Best the greatest / Baller West Ham ever had / But from the stands they’d shout each game / Go home you Black bastard” and “Please realise, you could never disguise / You’s a Black man in a cold cold land” to which Deli immediately replies “This isn’t about football, this is you on your high horse again.”¹⁷⁶ Gilroy speaks of the ‘nature of resistance’ inherent in Black music from the songs of the Atlantic slaves, to the “calypso rhythms” and “old-time kinky reggae rhythms” we find being reproduced by Baygee (on guitar) and Clifton in *Elmina’s Kitchen*. “These cultures have been produced over a long period of time in conditions of the most terrible oppression. They have been created *inside and in opposition to the capitalist system* of racial exploitation and domination, by those who experience subordination at its most vicious and degrading.”¹⁷⁷ [my emphasis] In this case, being “inside...the capitalist system” equates to being in Deli’s takeaway, but Clifton is by no means a victim of Deli’s “exploitation” and “subordination”. Clifton has since moved back to the West Indies, having been an absent father to Deli and seemingly only returning for Dougie’s release from prison. Deli, on the other hand, has struggled to make a life in Britain, on his own with his son Ashley. Naturally, he is defending the existence he has built in this country by reminding Clifton that he is on his “high horse” concerning issues of race and racism. Deli sees the business as an extension of his own life, and security for

¹⁷⁵ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.40

¹⁷⁶ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina’s Kitchen*, p.55

¹⁷⁷ Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, p.210

Ashley's future. When he discovers that Dougie has been killed on his last day in prison, he does not fold but becomes more resolute. The shop gets a business facelift where "The newly painted walls no longer have any posters. And the stools have been replaced by Ikea-style modern ones."¹⁷⁸ Also Deli is described as being in "new businessman mode."¹⁷⁹ He regards the other West Indian characters as maintaining outmoded notions of racism, but in defending a progressive way of thinking he is also bolstering a neoliberal ideology that claims that "fixation with identity...looks like a fall-back position...for all those who have abandoned the race [read as economic race rather than biological race] or been excluded from it,"¹⁸⁰ an ideology that claims to level concepts of identity (race, class, gender, ability) in favour of creating a single identity for all to measure up to, that of the entrepreneur or neo-subject. However, one of the elements of the 'business facelift' comes in the form of changing the name (with encouragement from Anastasia) from 'Elmina's Kitchen' to 'Elmina's Plantain Hut' (partly in reference to his hybridised chicken/plantain burger discussed earlier) which "evokes ideas about the impact of the past on the present"¹⁸¹ Deli is unwittingly caught between two worlds; the old world of Black subjugation and the neo-world of 'complicit subjectivity'.¹⁸²

Deli's response to the divisiveness of the other characters' proclamations could be as equally rooted in his political beliefs, as much as in his economic ambition. As Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks* "In no way should I dedicate myself to the revival of an unjustly unrecognized Negro civilization. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future."¹⁸³ This sentiment resonates in each of Deli's above statements, where he seems to want to 'move on' from racist notions of the past and is not afraid to preach this idea to the likes of Digger and Clifton. However, this is a double-edged sword as by attempting to 'move on', by using neoliberal ideology as a vehicle, Deli is also pulling a veil over the past. Specifically, the past crimes of the British empire. Early capitalism manifested itself in Britain as

¹⁷⁸ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.51

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.52

¹⁸⁰ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 7700 of 7830]

¹⁸¹ Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights*, p.51

¹⁸² Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6262 of 7830]

¹⁸³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.176

classical liberalism, which foregrounded profound contradictions such as the growth of utilitarianism (the notion of the greatest happiness/contentment for the greatest number of people) with an increase in the number of slaves in the Western world and further colonisation of people and land across the globe. As this liberalism evolved into imperial liberalism towards the end of the 19th century, it “bore a somewhat equivocal relation to the new strands of racism and anthropology premised on notions of radical and perhaps ineradicable differences among human group.”¹⁸⁴, differences that were used to justify the slave trade, and which leads some scholars to argue there is a “constitutive colonial relation between racial slavery and liberalism.”¹⁸⁵ The evolution of liberal economics from the 18th-20th century, with the rise of *laissez-faire* economics and the ever greater emphasis placed on private property rights, meant that when colonisation ‘ended’ in the mid-late 20th century, its shadow manifested itself in different economic forms; through the ancillary processes of neo-colonialism (the use of capitalism, globalisation and cultural imperialism to influence developing countries indirectly) and the more localised and insidious processes of neoliberalism. A through-line can be drawn from classical liberalism to neoliberalism (with colonialism, slavery and neo-colonialism acting as waypoints) with capitalist economics acting as the steady, guiding hand so that “the period of neo-liberal globalisation (from Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher to the collapse of the George W. Bush administration with the failure in Iraq and on Wall Street), exemplifies the logic of coloniality taken to its extreme.”¹⁸⁶ *Elmina’s Kitchen* was first performed at the downturn of Mignolo’s stated period of neo-liberal globalisation (2003), but Deli’s character exemplifies how deep-rooted the neoliberal ideal has become. One of the elements of neoliberalism is that it exalts a ‘perpetual present’ which “makes subjects floating pawns. One day they are invited to change cars, the next to change partners, the next their identity”¹⁸⁷ However, this is linked to its erasure of the brutal past that brought the present about, the cancellation of all past wrongs and moral debts, so as to give the impression

¹⁸⁴ J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, 2005) p.241

¹⁸⁵ B. Hesse, ‘Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity’ in *Political Theory*, Vol 42, No. 3 (2014) p.304

¹⁸⁶ W. Mignolo, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’ in *Academia.edu* (2019) p.43 [online]. [Accessed 8th August 2022] Available at:

https://www.academia.edu/8843946/Coloniality_the_darker_side_of_Western_modernity

¹⁸⁷ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6989 of 7830]

that, right here, right now (which should not be mistaken for Fanon's notion of *proper time, proper place*, which seeks to link the context of historic events with the psychology of its subjects) all neo-subjects are 'equal'.

Although it may sound to the other characters in the play that Deli is defending the White society they find themselves in, it is much more likely that he is protecting the neoliberal ideology that promises to protect his business, and therefore his security and his future (Ashley). The consequence of this is an ever-widening gap between Deli and the other Black characters in the play. Anastasia leaves, eventually unable to stand the presence of Digger, a gangster not unlike the one that took her own son's life; Clifton, Deli's absent father, who is rejected by Deli, finds no refuge in *Elmina's Kitchen*; and Ashley, Deli's own son, who trends towards gangsterism as he sees his father being beaten down by rival Asian shopkeeper, Roy. Deli has cuts and bruises on his face at the opening of the play, as a result of fighting with Roy, then Roy attempts to open a West Indian takeaway right next to *Elmina's Kitchen* as the play progresses, "He takes away your pride then your livelihood...you've lost it blood." Deli's response to this is an early indication of the fractures between father and son, but it also implies intracultural fissures, as signified by Ashley's response "I'm not no blood wid you."¹⁸⁸ Ashley often addresses his father casually, attempting to use terms such as "nigger" and "dread", but he is quickly slapped down by Deli who clearly feels Ashley is talking to him as if he was some street hood. This view of his son truly reveals itself later in the play, when Ashley enters the *Kitchen* dressed up and strutting around much in the same way as Digger does from the outset. After Ashley offers to take his father for a ride in his new BMW to "show you *my* world" Deli snaps back "Look at you, you little monkey. Dressed up like a fucking circus clown. You want me to partake in that?"¹⁸⁹ After all of Deli's preaching to the other characters about outmoded, racialised ways of thinking, he puts down his son using the word "monkey". He is using the word (monkey) in context, referring to Ashley's 'performance' as a bad man gangster within the Black culture, but there is no escaping the connotations of this word in the context of White, racialised

¹⁸⁸ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.27

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.74

thinking of the past. The hermetically sealed Black world of *Elmina's Kitchen* fractures and the capital city, of what was once the old Empire, begins to seep in.

In *Jitney* (1982), the 8th play in August Wilson's Pittsburgh cycle, which is set in a run-down gypsy cab station at the end of the 70s, we find, again, it is an 'exclusively' Black world, that of the jitney cab drivers. Jitneys were unofficial, unlicensed cabs which used to operate in areas where 'regular' taxi cabs refused to go. This particular cab station is run by Becker, who has built it up from scratch. During the play his son, Booster, is released from prison. His incarceration is an example of a biased justice system. Booster shoots his White ex-girlfriend dead when she accuses him of raping her after her father, a racist powerful oil-executive, catches them mid-coitus. His reaction, though extreme, is prompted by watching his father having to bow down to White landlords as he was growing up. Booster claims he was standing up for himself, regardless of the extreme reaction, in ways his father never did. This infuriates Becker, who has bought into the American Dream of becoming a 'self-made' man, and he rejects his son with the most heart-breaking of utterances "You are my son. I helped bring you into this world. But from this moment on...I'm calling the deal off. You ain't nothing to me, boy. You just another nigger on the street."¹⁹⁰ The sentiment is echoed in the 6th of Wilson's cycle, *Fences* (1983). Although not strictly a workplace play, it documents the life of garbageman Troy, a once outstanding baseball player who was let down by institutional racism in American professional sports and comes to blows with his son (Cory) when he is offered a football scholarship. Again, Wilson repeats a variation on a phrase (as with "Aint nobody studying you") as Troy lashes at Cory "Nigger! That's what you are. You just another nigger on the street to me!"¹⁹¹ When fathers reject their sons using the most damaging of racial slurs ("monkey", "nigger") it not only indicates a whitewashing of the suffering caused by a racialised past, but as in *Elmina's Kitchen* (and to some extent *Jitney*, although set at the very start of the neoliberal movement) it shows an acceptance of an identity embedded in neoliberal thinking; that of the individual without history, the 'self-made' man. The neo-subject.

¹⁹⁰ A. Wilson, *Jitney*. (Nick Hern Books, 2001) p.44

¹⁹¹ A. Wilson, *Fences and Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Penguin Books Ltd. 1988) p.105

The evolution of Deli's character as a neo-subject in *Elmina's Kitchen* mirrors the same internal change that happens to one of my own central characters in *Local* (2000). In *Local* we are quickly introduced to Merdod's rival newsagent, Ardeshir. These two men have history as they were both part of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, but both from different, losing factions. Their rivalry has gone from politics and religion, to customers and newspapers. Ardeshir attempts to steal a customer from Merdod, by using new technologies to redefine the territorial boundaries of the newspaper rounds, and even his son (Reza) to physically threaten their rivals. Merdod retaliates by using his 'power' as newly elected President of the NFRN (National Federation of Retail Newsagents) to block Ardeshir's application for an off-licence. Both begin to use what would be considered as 'immoral' methods to try and get the upper hand for their business, and as their relationship reaches tipping point, Merdod levels the accusation: "I know exactly who. With his computers and satellites. That thieving nomad!"¹⁹² Merdod finally reveals the true extent of his neoliberal becoming, as he labels Ardeshir a 'theiving nomad', and, although phrased differently, it is the kind of rhetoric we might find in response to immigration, headlining a European Far Right poster or website. A similar change occurs in Deli. During the play's denouement, Deli reveals his own perspective on a new wave of immigration. His criticism is aimed at a particular type of person (i.e. the Jamaican yardie) and becomes a defining moment for determining where his allegiances lie: "I been here ten years Digger, what makes you think I'm gonna pay some 'off the boat' bloody Yard boy money that I don't have."¹⁹³

Whether it is Deli's "'off the boat' bloody Yard boy" or Merdod's "thieving nomad" at this point (and in the final scenes of each of the plays) both of these characters are drawing distinct lines between themselves and those from the same cultural background. They are both rejecting people from their culture of origin, in order to fit into the hegemonic culture that they now inhabit i.e. neoliberalism. They are beginning to view some of those from their own culture as the foreign Other, along with all the negative characteristics that go with that assignment. It is also true to say that Deli and Merdod are trying to escape very specific and personal legacies that the other characters impose

¹⁹² A. Pezhman, *Local* (unpublished, 2000) p.54

¹⁹³ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.84

on them, whether that is Merdod attempting to escape Ardeshir's guilt and blame (relating to a failed revolution) or Deli trying to escape Digger's violence and Clifton's neglect and opportunism. However, in trying to assimilate with the British culture and community, and through an affiliation with neoliberalism, which enables the appearance that this assimilation is possible because of its erasure of identity and the past, they have allowed the effect and influence of neoliberalism to alter their allegiances and therefore negate their prevailing identity. This uneasy hybridisation, which is derived both in collusion with and as a counterpoint to the celebratory market hybridisation that is championed by neoliberal ideology, can be seen to be represented by characters like Merdod and Deli. In the case of *Elmina's Kitchen*, Deli positions himself as entrepreneur because it gives him the tools to reject the ongoing legacies of Digger and Clifton, and allows him an identity away from such negative stereotypes. However, and albeit unwittingly, instead of becoming the "African-American hero" that is "celebrated" by a big brand beer (as depicted by the posters that adorn the walls of the takeaway from the outset of the play) Deli can be seen to emerge as a 'Black British hero' 'celebrating' the ideals of neoliberalism. However, it is the avaricious nature of this ideology that feeds Digger's violent exploitative nature, leading to the murder of Ashley and ultimately making Deli a victim, not a hero, of late-stage capitalism.

Conclusion

In reference to the poststructuralist concept of "the death of the author", Black theatre makers are not responsible for their characters' thoughts, beliefs and actions, and they often create archetypes in naturalistic settings that "serve a universe that allows both the living and the dead to drive the actions of a dramatic event."¹⁹⁴ Kwei-Armah's motives for his Triptych that documents the Black London experience at the turn of the 21st century was theatrically inspired by (amongst others) August Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle*, but it was also inspired by his own experiences.

¹⁹⁴P. C. Harrison quoted in M. Pearce, *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story*, p.65

When I was young I never had a home. I used to call myself at sixteen famously a ‘universal alien’. When I walked out on the streets in London, they’d say ‘Go back home, you Black bastard.’ When I went to the West Indies they’d say, ‘You’re English.’ When I go to Africa, they say ‘Go home. Look at you, Bob Marley.’ I’d never had a home until I discovered that I was an African and that actually I was a diasporic African.¹⁹⁵

Kwei-Armah’s parents were born in Grenada but he traced his roots back to Ghana. He explores the conflict between West Indian British Blacks and African British Blacks in *Statement of Regret*, which complicates ideas of identity and heritage by analysing the fact that slaves taken from Africa “make the people of the Caribbean a people of diaspora, who in the United Kingdom then became twice diasporized.”¹⁹⁶ He attempts to deconstruct essentialist notions of race by exploring characters that are “neither the fixed souls of the closed discourses of fundamentalism nor the vacant, wandering nomads of postmodernism or global homogenization.”¹⁹⁷ The second part of Hall’s statement here is thrown into question in *Elmina’s Kitchen*. Characters such as door-to-door salesman Baygee and Deli’s restless father, Clifton, are seemingly more comfortable to roam than to settle, as they are alienated from the societies they are ‘connected’ to. Kwei-Armah’s alienation as a young man, from each of his inherited cultures, clearly influences his writing. And he complicates it well beyond the rather glib protestation ‘racism is bad’, by exploring worlds and characters that must incorporate and contend with both historical grievances as well as the struggles of living in the contemporary world. While Fanon’s statement “I am not the slave of Slavery that dehumanised my ancestors,”¹⁹⁸ is embodied by the character of Deli, “Kwei-Armah’s authorial voice is clearly of the opinion that black improvement lies in historical recuperation.”¹⁹⁹ Unfortunately, for the characters in *Elmina’s Kitchen* “knowing one’s racial history” suggests a “fixation with identity” which can result in exclusion from neoliberal society, which seeks to erase the past injustices on which it is founded.

¹⁹⁵K. Kwei-Armeh quoted in M. Pearce, *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story*, p.53

¹⁹⁶ Hall, *The Fateful Triangle* [Location 1946 of 3058]

¹⁹⁷ Hall, *The Fateful Triangle* [Location 2000 of 3058]

¹⁹⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.179

¹⁹⁹ M. Pearce, *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story*, p.64

Living, and making a living, in an advanced capitalist society requires the neo-subject to be ‘ever present’ and adapt their identity, often daily, as exemplified by Deli’s actions; changing the name of the shop, ‘globalising’ his menu, adorning the walls with ‘African Budweiser’ adverts then taking them down to give the shop an Ikea ‘facelift’ etc. This idea of ‘keeping up with the market’ thereby negates the possibility of seeking out and striving for justice related to a brutalised past. The pressure of neoliberal society bears down on the Black characters in *Elmina’s Kitchen*; Deli’s struggling business, Digger’s necessity to remain Top Boy in a violent underworld, Ashley’s attraction to a glamourised gangster lifestyle, Baygee’s old-school hustle in designer fakes, Anastasia’s issues with gambling, Clifton needing a roof over his head. Under the pressure of an environment where “the rise of identity politics, corporate multi-culture and an imploded, narcissistic obsession with the minutiae of ethnicity,”²⁰⁰ characters align themselves with ethnic categories and subcategories that creates the catastrophic intra-racial conflict that we witness in *Elmina’s Kitchen*. Although there is no direct ‘White presence’ in *Elmina’s Kitchen*, the neoliberal ideals that the protagonist (Deli) champions, are products of White Western economic policy that is coincident with classical liberalism, colonialism and the slave trade. Much like the the use of Senegalese soldiers by *the French colonisers* to crush the Malagasy uprising, in Fanon’s example earlier, it is possible to make a correlation between the ‘invisible colonisers’ here and the ‘invisible hand’ at work in *laissez faire* neoliberal economics. The pressure of forging an existence in the Western world causes these characters to turn on each other, and even in on themselves. In Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), set in a 1920s recording studio, a Black musician fatally stabs another Black musician after being rejected by a White record producer. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1984) is set in the 1910s where Harold Loomis has been imprisoned by Joe Turner, a Southern White racist, for seven years even after Loomis had been freed from slavery (commonplace at that time in the US). Loomis is a haunted man who slices his own chest open with a knife in the final moments of the play. However, this is an act of emancipation, that metaphorically ‘frees’ him from the ‘shackles’ of Joe Turner. The denouements of Wilson’s plays do not always result in violence and death (both father figures in

²⁰⁰ Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, p.xiv

Fences and *Jitney* die before the final scene, albeit by natural or accidental means, respectively) or a bleak outlook for the future of intra-racial relationships in the Black community. *Radio Golf* (2005), the last of the plays in August's cycle, tells of a wealthy Black estate agent and mayoral candidate (Harmond Wilks) who forgoes his economic and political ambitions to stand shoulder to shoulder with the last remaining, poor Black inhabitant of the Hill District that he was planning to redevelop for his own personal gains. Wilson's final play on the cycle ends with a message of hope.

When Digger executes Ashley in front his father at the climax of *Elmina's Kitchen*, Deli lets out a guttural cry of grief. However, it is Digger's stark response that is the focus here "Yes! Ah so dis war run!"²⁰¹ Digger likens the neoliberal environment to a battlefield "where petty turf wars and disputes culminate in Ashley's murder, a reflection of how troubled masculine insecurities, betrayals and competitive battles for supremacy, are symptomatic of a world where the lack of solidarity between Black men is manifested in their pursuit of individual gain"²⁰² In their reading of neoliberal society, Dardot and Laval cite Marx

'In actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force, play the greatest part.' This violent birth indicates that what is involved is a war conducted by all available means, including terror, and which seizes every possible opportunity to establish the new regime of power and the new form of existence.²⁰³

They go on to state that the Chicago School's economic programme, the birthplace of neoliberalism as we know it today, cannot be reduced to a comparison with a military dictatorship because "we must not confuse general strategy and particular methods. The latter depend on local circumstances, the balance of power, and historical phases."²⁰⁴ and this Fanonian concept of *proper time, proper place* is something that I have returned to throughout this chapter. It is the "local circumstances, the balance of power, and historical phases"²⁰⁵ that determine the outcome of the play, set in London's Hackney

²⁰¹ Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen*, p.95

²⁰² Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights*, p.52

²⁰³ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 163 of 7830]

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

murder mile, several decades after the birth of neoliberalism. However, the general law of *competition* that underpins all social relations in a neoliberal society, and the final declaration from Digger that this *war* continues makes it almost impossible for the characters in *Elmina's Kitchen* to discern between anti-racism and neoliberalism, in the case of Deli, and competition and murder, in the case of Digger.

Chapter 3

'Broadening the palette' in Sabrina Mahfouz's *Chef*: intersectionality as resistance to neoliberal ideology in the performing arts

In the previous chapters I have scrutinised the way in which the already complex issue of racial and ethnic identity in England has been redefined by neoliberal governmentality introduced by Reaganite economic policy in the early 1980s – with economic competition rather than social welfare at its core - and, as a result, further antagonised the conflict both between and within races and ethnicities in Britain. The works that I have examined, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003), are male dominated, both in terms of the authors and the characters they portray. In this sense the primary focus has been on the ways in which race and class, where we read neoliberalism as “a vehicle for the restoration of class power”, overlap to create new opportunities for innovation and success as well as new sites of conflict, violence and oppression.²⁰⁶ However, as both dramatic works are all but male populated, and most certainly male-centric, they are limited with regards to how different social and political identities coalesce to form different modes of privilege and discrimination.

Intersectionality is a theory advanced by Kimberle Crenshaw in the late 1980s. Working as a lawyer in America, Crenshaw recognised that the gender element of race was exceptionally underdeveloped. She refers to historic legal cases, the most famous being *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, where she highlights that “the employer’s seniority system perpetuated the effects of past discrimination against Black women” which excluded them from employment opportunities.²⁰⁷ However, the courts balanced the claims of gender and race discrimination discretely, overthrowing the prosecution due to the fact that General Motors hired African-American male factory workers and White female office workers, disproving racial and gender discrimination respectively. The court was

²⁰⁶ D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p.31

²⁰⁷ K. Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.' in *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989) p.141

not prepared to create “a new classification of ‘Black women’” as “The creation of new classes of protected minorities, governed only by the mathematical principles of permutation and combination, clearly raises the prospect of opening the hackneyed Pandora’s box.”²⁰⁸ This leads Crenshaw to conclude that “the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by White women’s and Black men’s experiences” and that it is the very “permutation and combination” of these different social and political identities, differences the courts refuse to acknowledge, that create lived experiences that are greater than the sum of their parts.²⁰⁹

The focus of this chapter will be on Sabrina Mahfouz’s theatrical monologue, *Chef* (2015). Mahfouz is a female playwright with creative roots in performance poetry and, like other British performance poets of her time such as Kae Tempest (formally Kate Tempest) and Polarbear (aka Steve Camden), has branched out into writing more narrative driven work for theatre. Mahfouz has become prolific in theatrical circles over the past several years, writing numerous pieces for stage (as well as works-in-progress for film and television) which have garnered critical success and several awards. She has also written award winning theatre for children, has been writer in residence at Shakespeare’s Globe theatre and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (FRSL). She is a writer that has not forgotten her roots and has received accolades for her published poetry work, as well as her work as an editor and as an essayist, contributing to the multi award-winning anthology *The Good Immigrant* (2016). Mahfouz describes herself as a second-generation immigrant, and her ethnicity as “part Guyanese, part British, part Egyptian. All countries with huge amounts of mixed racial heritage.”²¹⁰ Here is a writer who believes she does not belong in any particular literary box, a belief which she extends to her own ethnic profile, a position that is constantly contested by – because it confounds – essentialist notions of identity.

As I hope to use intersectionality as a central concept throughout the following, at this juncture I believe it also important to raise the issue of positionality. As Crenshaw highlights,

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p.142

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p.143

²¹⁰ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz. [Accessed 23rd August, 2020]

critiques of racism can over-shadow, if not completely obscure, critiques of sexism.²¹¹ Yet, the experiences of (read: prejudices against) Mahfouz (and, by proxy, her non-White female characters) can intersect, resulting in greater damages than those brought about by racism and sexism acting independently. I am not in Mahfouz's position. I am a first-generation Iranian-British male and I need to be conscious of the location from which I argue. In previous chapters I have used Homi K. Bhabha's theory of ambivalence in an attempt to both encapsulate and counter hegemonic, colonial reasoning. However, Bhabha does not take gender in account when formulating his hypotheses as his "work on the ambivalence of colonial discourses explores the relationship between a 'colonising subject' and a 'colonised subject' in highly abstract terms without reference to how the specifics of gender might complicate his model."²¹² The result of this blind spot is that "his discussions of colonial subjectivity 'invoke the structures of desire without addressing the structures of sexuality.'"²¹³ I have also used Fanon's concepts, his contra-Freudian observations of proper time/proper place, and the idea that some neuroses are socially constructed and dependent on the ethnic/racial context in which they are created. Yet, as with Bhabha, he fails to properly account for gender as

his colonised subject is exclusively male and he abruptly dismisses the psychosexuality of the 'woman of colour': 'I know nothing about her' (1967: 180). Whereas Fanon's male colonial subject moves from disempowerment and objectification to revolt, both Black and White women remain, in his account, the terrain on which men move and enact their battles with each other.²¹⁴

This is exemplified by the characters of Tania in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Anastasia in *Elmina's Kitchen*, who act as little more than pawns in the power games of the male characters.

This is not to detract from either of these postcolonial thinkers (Fanon, Bhabha), as their contributions in bringing profound critical thinking to the dominant, colonial structures that still persist are invaluable. However in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 1988)

²¹¹ Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex', p.162

²¹² J. McLeod, *Beginning postcolonialism* (2nd ed.) (Manchester University Press, 2010) p.205

²¹³ Young quoted in A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge, 2015) p.163

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.162

“Spivak problematises the relationship between ‘Third World’ women and their representation via ‘First World’ scholarship” by raising the question “what is the relationship between the investigator, their methodology, and the object they study – can the researcher ever be disinterested?”²¹⁵ Here Spivak warns that the relation of the critic towards the object of their critique is paramount. Garman reinforces this notion by contending that “the character of the speaker (ethos)” and “the disposition of the listener (pathos)” is equal to, if not more important than “the strength of the argument (logos)”²¹⁶ a logic which has, to date, dominated the ‘enlightened’ Western philosophical paradigm. Therefore, my *pathos* as a male critic, in relation to Mahfouz’s *ethos* as represented in her work and by her characters, needs to be accounted for, as positionality is closely related to any discussion of intersectionality. This becomes doubly pertinent for theatrical writing as “The performance of a legitimate ethos for the speaker entails much more than a rational argument, it primarily rests on personal experience, the demonstration of deep affect, and even performance.”²¹⁷ Taking into account my own position and the subject matter of this chapter, I will attempt to build my arguments around references that are not only primarily from women or critical race theorists or academics of colour, but from female critical race theorists of colour, in the hope of bringing some balance to my source material and in turn my discourse.

The Intersectional experience

“I thought you'd be, you know, darker.

You don't look at all how I imagined.

Well, I have to say, I thought you'd look more, ha ha, I suppose, foreign.

You look a bit English, though.

²¹⁵ McLeod, *Beginning postcolonialism*, p.210

²¹⁶ A. Garman, ‘When the Students Are Revolting: The (Im)Possibilities of Listening in Academic Contexts in South Africa’ in *Ethical Responsiveness and the Politics of Difference* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p.104

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.104

It's quite a relief you're, well, you know...”²¹⁸

The above quote is from Mahfouz’s essay ‘Wearing Where You're At: Immigrant and U.K. Fashion’ taken from the anthology *The Good Immigrant*. Mahfouz elaborates on these comments that “were spoken by different people, from different backgrounds at different times of my life...on what it means to have a name that indicates non-Whiteness but a skin tone that indicates a happy harmony with the politically and economically dominant racial group of the previous few centuries...It is part of our endemic racism that we immediately attribute the experience of otherness to somebody who immediately fulfils what otherness is supposed to aesthetically be.”²¹⁹ The anthology, as the title suggests, is threaded together by themes of race/ethnicity/colour. While Mahfouz’s essay focuses on the impact that immigration has had on British fashion, what is noteworthy are the instances of personal racial abuse (usually occurring at bus stops or on bus journeys in London) that she describes, predicated on her wearing ‘ethnic’ clothes and accessories, and predominantly (although not exclusively, but by accounts, certainly more aggressively) coming from White men.

One approached her at a bus stop, as she stood wearing a turban-style headdress (similar to the style her Egyptian grandmother wore) and screamed “All Muslims should die” in her face. Another incident saw her physically threatened by two young White men on a night bus, one even taking of his belt “to presumably threaten to hit me with or take down his jeans more efficiently”, while hurling insults at her choice of apparel.²²⁰ The essay is not all about racism and abuse and goes on to document how London and the rest of the country has been shaped positively by immigrant fashion. However, what is significant for this chapter is that despite being asked to write about the experience of being an immigrant, it becomes impossible for Mahfouz to comment on her experiences without bringing gender and class (which she playfully hints at as she reflects on her bus stop/journey stories by musing that “all of this is making me think I should probably just save up for a car”) into the

²¹⁸ S. Mahfouz ‘Wearing Where You’re At: Immigrant and UK Fashion’ in *The Good Immigrant* (Unbound, 2016) p.97

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.97-98

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.99

equation.²²¹ It is the interface between race, gender and class that I would like to explore further, using Mahfouz's stage play *Chef* to identify how intersectionality can point to the convergence of multiple forms of oppression in neoliberal society, but also how it can act as a location of resistance against neoliberal ideology.

Chef's story

Chef is a lyrical, dramatic monologue that documents the life of a passionate but beleaguered cuisinier, who has been imprisoned for euthanising her estranged, abusive father. Our protagonist engages her audience as she enthuses about her ambitions of owning her own restaurant in the future, while describing/preparing mouth-watering dishes such as coconut curried tofu, yellowtail sashimi on shaved turnip with rhubarb gravy and red berries with hibiscus jasmine sorbet. These compositions act as 'spoons full of sugar' as she relays less palatable stories of the violent, tragic past that have led her to where the audience observe her in the dramatic present, preparing food for fellow inmates in the kitchens of an all-female prison, though we can assume the dishes she cooks are not the dishes the inmates eat as Chef laments "I miss the taste of coconut... We don't ever get coconut in here."²²² The story is dominated by accounts of a violent and controlling patriarchy as Chef describes rebelling against her mother as a teenager to go and work for her ex-army dad on a fishing trawler on the North Sea

"Mum wasn't too keen on letting me go,

He'd left her with not much more than a reshaped nose

And scars that would make sure he was always around

²²¹ Mahfouz is from a working-class background. As editor of the anthology *Smashing it! Working class artists on Life, Art and making it happen* (The Westbourne Press, 2019), she reflects in the introduction on how, in interviews, she is often asked about barriers to her gender and ethnicity in the industry, but rarely on the often-greater difficulties her social class presents.

²²² S. Mahfouz, *Chef* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015) p.14

Even when he hadn't eaten a meal with us for five years."²²³

This soon comes undone as she recalls him almost strangling her for spilling hot soup on the deck, only to be saved by a crew member intervening, as memories of her violent upbringing come flooding back

“Just like that Dad forgot
To keep doing those things to my skin
That made me remember
What it was like to have him as a live-in father.
I jumped off at the next harbour
And didn't cook again for five years.”²²⁴

During these five years Chef falls for a dangerous and controlling gangster who “cuts shapes into skin cos his words didn't work” but she decides to bail on the relationship when he asks her to conceal a gun.²²⁵

“this one night when my Gucci cowboy boots
were full of lead end dreams,
sharp angles that dug into my ankles,
making me walk like I had one foot on the moon”²²⁶

It is at this point in her timeline that she begins to cook and is soon taken on by a chef in a local bistro where she “learnt how to taste as if my tongue was a paintbrush.”²²⁷ A few years later and she is running her own kitchen, when her father returns to her doorstep pleading with her to accept

²²³ Ibid., p.18

²²⁴ Ibid., p.20-21

²²⁵ Ibid., p.8

²²⁶ Ibid., p.10

²²⁷ Ibid., p.13

him back. She refuses and he walks away. A couple of months after this, over Sunday dinner, her mum tells her that he's dying. A couple of years later, he rings her and asks her to help him end his own life, which she reluctantly does, resulting in her incarceration. In prison she is asked to help run the kitchen, and takes on board two helpers, Sasha and Candice. Candice also has a history marred with violence, as witness to her dad brutally murdering his own father and her mum after he found out they were sleeping together. A life set spinning off its axis early on, Candice spiralled out of control until she found herself in prison. Chef is told she can have her in the kitchen if she keeps her away from the knives. One day, Candice purposefully flips the knife from Chef's hand, stabbing herself fatally with it. The play ends on an intertwined timeline, in the style of a court trial, as Chef must accept responsibility for her father's death as well as Candice's, and the links between the two incidents are suggested as a possible indicator of her own violent disposition. As with the food preparation, and this final scene, the timeframe of the narrative is chopped and mixed throughout.

'Any ethnicity' – acknowledging ethnicity as a sliding signifier

Mahfouz is deft in the way she constructs the drama, interspersing past, present and future in a series of well-plotted revelations through the blending of lyrical, conversational and verbatim-like dialogue depending on what the situation demands; lyrical in her description of the past, conversational, personable and passionate in the presentation of her food to the audience in the present, and verbatim-like when portraying the case against her regarding the fate of her father and Candice, the outcome of which will inevitably determine her own future. However, it is the initial stage direction that raises the greatest question about intersectionality, as the author states

Chef *is wearing a white chef's top and jogging bottoms.*

*She is the only actor and can be of any age and any ethnicity.*²²⁸

²²⁸ Ibid., p.3

Her job role and gender are fixed, while her ethnicity is undetermined.²²⁹ It is worth dwelling at some length on this indicator about the role of ethnicity in the play for it requires a great deal of unpacking. Most play texts have a character list, and the level of character specificity varies from play to play. When it comes to ethnicity, if the author has a specific race or ethnicity in mind, it is either stated in the character list or, if not, in the body of the text. If it is not stated then it is often automatically assumed, in Western theatre and at least up until recently, that the character is White. A recent article for outlining tips for writing character descriptions from the Playwrights' Center states that "If you're including ethnicity, make sure to list it for every character. *Whiteness is not an assumption; it's a racial identity.*"²³⁰ [my emphasis] However, most British theatres balk at the notion of defining the ethnicity of characters in play texts, as it is goes against the Western Enlightenment paradigm of universality. By stating that Chef can be of *any ethnicity*, Mahfouz subtly challenges this by neither adhering to the rule of specifying ethnic identity, nor assuming that the character is White, which is the paradox at the heart of enlightened universalism.

Care must be taken when conflating the terms race and ethnicity as they can mean very different things as standalone terms. However, their individual meanings have changed historically, while current critical thinking has also highlighted that these 'separate' definitions overlap.²³¹

in the discourses of cultural difference that have assumed much greater significance in our post-Enlightenment world, "ethnicity" is every bit as much a discursive construct, a sliding signifier, as "race." Indeed, in the taxonomies of cultural difference, and in the

²²⁹ Although age is undetermined in the stage direction, and is a relevant area of study when considering how marginalised groups are adversely affected in dominant systems, for the sake of this study the focus will be on class, gender and ethnicity in order to align more with theories on intersectionality.

²³⁰ C. Trieschmann, 'Tips for writing characters descriptions' in *Playwrights' Center* (August 15th, 2017) [online]. [Accessed 1st June 2022] Available at: <https://www.pwcenter.org/playwriting-toolkit/tips-writing-character-descriptions>

²³¹ The definition of 'race' that was once rooted in the pseudo-sciences of the nineteenth century (phrenology, physiognomy) came to be classified much more along cultural terms in the latter half of the twentieth century due to international migration and globalisation, and has now begun to anchor itself once again in terms of biology with the mapping of the human genome at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

play of identities and identifications that is the serious stroke behind this discursive game, ethnicity and race continue to play hide-and-seek with one another.²³²

Hall argues this from the standpoint of people of colour, recognising that these definitions are nothing but *discursive* in nature, sliding between the biological, historical, cultural and political. Mahfouz, also writing from the position of the ‘ethnic other’ acknowledges the discursive nature of this signifier by stating that the character of Chef can be of *any ethnicity*, which at its heart challenges essentialist ideas about the fixed position of the ‘ethnic other’. How then does this character description destabilise the notion of ‘Whiteness’ (a racial signifier) and ‘Englishness’ (an ethnic signifier) which, as the dominant groups in British playwriting to date, are generally not acknowledged as being part of an othered racial or ethnic group?

The category White English is often seen as a homogenous, monolithic ethnic group, stretching back centuries along a relatively unaltered hereditary bloodline. The result is that (White) Englishness is often accepted as a given, an example of how a dominant group acts as the standard or ‘the norm’ despite the fact that “Englishness has been formed in the crucible of the internal colonial encounter with Ireland, Scotland and Wales; imperial rivalries with other European countries; and imperial conquests abroad.”²³³ Historically, the ‘English’ are made up of several different ‘tribes’ or ethnicities; Celts (the indigenous Britons), Saxons (originally from the Gothic or Teutonic tribes of central Europe) and Normans (French). During the nineteenth century, and as the result of anti-Irish (read: Celtic) sentiment (caused by immigration and the financial support obliged from England’s tax payers in order to support their nearest colony during the potato famine) English anthropologists, riding on the back of the then new racial pseudo-sciences, fervently began to sub-categorise the ethnicities of England even further; Anglians, Cymrians, Jutians etc.²³⁴ However, as England’s empire grew, some anthropologists (such as Matthew Arnold) began to argue that there

²³² S. Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Kindle Edition, 2017) [Location 1238 of 3058]

²³³ A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora; Contesting Identities* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1996) p.206

²³⁴ R. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008) p.127

needed to be a definition of ‘Englishness’ that expressed something more all-encompassing, an identity that could be exported alongside the hundreds of thousands of *White* English that were settling, working and ruling in the British colonies thousands of miles from England’s borders – a commonality that should be defined more by the use of the English language (philology) rather than any biological/racial signifier (physiognomy, phrenology), *but still deeply imbedded in the notion of Whiteness*. This was an identity that homogenised all the tribes mentioned above, namely the Anglo-Saxon. And yet the myth that this dominant position (read: standard, given) of being ‘White English’ (Anglo-Saxon) as an identity group is as old as the Saxon invasion, complicates the reality that it is only recently that it has been recognised that “Englishness is just another ethnicity.”²³⁵

When I think of word ‘ethnic’ I think of visiting headshops in my teens in the 1990s, being served by White women and men in tie-dyed skirts and shirts, often with noxious body odour (though I cannot claim that mine was much better at the time), selling incense and varying sized reproductions of Buddha. Or White couples from the Home Counties who, having conceived their children in five-star hotels overlooking the Taj Mahal, then decide on calling them India. It is a word that conjures up the ‘dirty’ but also the ‘exotic’, respectively. What is astute about Mahfouz’s use of the signifier is that it decentres the notion of both nation and colour and challenges essentialist notions of identity and in turn “through processes of decentring, these new political and cultural formations continually challenge the minoritising and peripheralising impulses of the cultures of dominance.”²³⁶ By using the phrase *any ethnicity* Mahfouz is not only challenging preconceived ideas about casting in British theatre (something which I will discuss in further detail), but she also challenges dominant ways of thinking that do not, or cannot see that being English is just another ethnicity that is profoundly entangled with race i.e. being White.

The *any ethnicity* indicator seems to gesture towards the idea of ‘colour-blindness’, a complex and problematic concept that Patricia J. Williams goes into some detail exploring in her Reith Lectures, *Seeing a colorblind future*. Williams expresses a hope that one day such a future might

²³⁵ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p.206

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

come, but in the current global marketplace “Whether dressed up as “news,” “entertainment,” “sport,” or “science,” the new rationalized irrationality of race is almost always “big business”, one endless shell game of race, class, ethnicity, culture, and identity played out against one another.”²³⁷ She uses the O.J. Simpson case as a specific example of how a high-profile case caught in the media’s eye can quickly become racialised, but she also points to the broader dilemma of the Black population in the UK and the US where there is a constant negotiation of “this distance between the self, and the drama of one’s stereotype.”²³⁸ Or, as she rather hauntingly elucidates “The shattered self and the masquerade.”²³⁹ All actors tread a fine line between these two states, but none more so than actors of colour. The pitfalls of colour-blind casting are something I have experienced in my own work. During the casting of *Local* (2000) at the Royal Court theatre, a play that had five Iranian characters (one of them being of mixed heritage, Iranian-British), we saw a great many South Asian performers try and fill the roles. When interviewing Mahfouz it is clear, even some fifteen to twenty years later, that she has come across similar issues around representation “The usual ethnicity of actors cast to play my Arabic characters has been South Asian. And I am grateful to them and their own struggle to be represented and to not have enough roles to be constantly working.”²⁴⁰ For *Local*, we were lucky enough to settle on an outstanding cast, though not truly representative. Of the five ‘Iranian’ characters we ended up with one Iranian actor, a Pakistani actor, a mixed South Asian/West Indian actor, an Iraqi actor and a half-Spanish half-English actor. Even this was not easy and, dissatisfied with the initial casting call (due to lack of representation rather than lack of talent), we had to extend the casting period by two weeks to find more appropriate players. As Mahfouz articulates

I tried being ethnically specific in previous plays, in order to encourage people to look further in their casting endeavours. However, the less commonly dramatised ethnicities...ended up being cast with actors from outside those ethnicities...Every Arabic character I have ever written for TV or theatre has never, ever been played by an Arabic actor”²⁴¹

²³⁷ P. J. Williams, *Seeing a Colorblind Future: The Paradox of Race* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) p.58

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.73

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.26

²⁴⁰ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

It appears we were relatively lucky to at least maintain some proximity to the prescribed ethnicity of the characters when casting for *Local*, but these experiences highlight that casting ethnically specific characters can be a minefield.

In December 2020, the highly anticipated remake of the film *Dune* was set to be released (though delayed due to the Covid-19 global pandemic), a film which had already been criticised for the profound lack of Middle Eastern actors. Palestinian-German filmmaker, Lexi Alexander expressed “her dismay that a film that focused on Middle Eastern culture featured zero Middle Eastern actors.”²⁴² *Dune* is an adaptation of the 1965 sci-fi novel of the same name, by White American author Frank Herbert, which sees factions fighting for the most valuable substance in the universe (The Spice) on the desert planet Arrakis, so that “even a casual political observer will recognize the parallels between the universe of *Dune* and the Middle East of the late 20th century.”²⁴³ The question for Alexander here is, why should a science fiction story set on such an alien world *not* include Middle Eastern actors? This is not the first time Alexander has called out Hollywood over its (mis/under) representation of the ‘ethnic other’ and, although it is often not explicit, the phenomenon tends to arise from decisions made on finance. In 2014 Ridley Scott released the biblical epic *Exodus: Gods and Kings* and defended his whitewashed casting by stating that “I can’t mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such...I’m just not going to get it financed.”²⁴⁴ In an interview in 2017, Alexander responded to this by stating that what Scott had said was “rude, but it was an *honest* answer...because that’s what everybody’s thinking.”²⁴⁵ So, is the answer to this cultural in nature, or financial? Or does

²⁴² N. J. Chisholm, “‘Dune’ adaptation accused of erasing Middle Eastern actors’ in *Colorlines* (Sept. 10th, 2020) [online]. [Accessed 30th November 2020] Available at: <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/dune-adaptation-accused-erasing-middle-eastern-actors>

²⁴³ W. Collins, ‘The Secret History of *Dune*’ in *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Sept. 16th, 2017) [online]. [Accessed 30th November 2020] Available at: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-secret-history-of-dune/>

²⁴⁴ Ridley Scott quoted in S. El-Shaarawi, ‘Mohamed so-and-so from such-and-such’ in *Africa Is a Country* (June 12th, 2014) [online]. [Accessed 30th November 2020] Available at: <https://africasacountry.com/2014/12/hey-ridley-scott-mohamed-so-and-so-wants-his-job-back/>

²⁴⁵ Lexi Alexander quoted in S. Li, ‘*Punisher: War Zone* director lauds Ed Skrein, but doubts Hollywood will change’ in *Entertainment Weekly* (Sept. 1st, 2017) [online]. [Accessed 30th November 2020] Available at: <https://ew.com/movies/2017/09/01/ed-skrein-punisher-war-zone/>

the latter act as thinly veiled excuse for the former? And which other marginalised groups are further relegated due to the overriding factor of budget?

Alexander's position as a female, German-Palestinian film director affords her an insight into the problems of representation in the industry, that incorporates more than issues of race and ethnicity. As a female director, and particularly as a female director of action films, she has had her own experiences of the lurking sexism that still pervades Tinseltown. "I've actually had executives say things like 'Oh, we're never hiring her' and 'She cannot make a decision if her life depended on it.'"²⁴⁶ In the world of film, time is quite literally money. So, when Alexander's executives are talking about being "decisive" what they are referring to is budget. However, what these executives do not (or at least do not need to) acknowledge is that 'decisiveness' is *discursively* constituted and, therefore, both gendered and raced. Masculine/White = active, feminine/non-White = passive. And as with the erasure of race when considering the casting of *Dune* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, Alexander's experiences as a brown woman in the industry emphasises how financial and budgetary considerations in Hollywood always intersect with culturally gendered stereotypes.

A comprehensive study in 2016 highlighted that in the U.K. half of entrants into film school were women²⁴⁷, yet they only made up 27.2% of those directing short films²⁴⁸, while women directing low budget films (£500,000 and below) made up only 16.1%. This percentage drops as the cost of the film rises, to the point where only 3.3% of big budget films (£30 million and over) were helmed by female directors.²⁴⁹ And the statistics are not much better for women working in theatre, whereby women made up just a third of all artistic directors. When considering female playwrights "in theatres with multiple spaces, 74% of plays written by women were programmed in the smaller space, with just 24% in the larger space." However, and specifically in terms of female directors, "this is not the

²⁴⁶ Lexi Alexander quoted in 'Celluloid Ceilings: Women Directors Speak Out' in *Women and Hollywood* (June 23rd, 2015) at 11 minutes 23 seconds [video: online]. [Accessed 21st October 2020] Available at: <https://womenandhollywood.com/watch-women-directors-speak-out-against-sexism-fight-against-hollywoods-past-and-present-2da463afc660/>

²⁴⁷ S. Fellows, A. Kreiger, E. Gomes, 'Cut Out of the Picture: A study of gender inequality amongst film directors in the UK film industry' *Directors UK* (May, 2016) p.54 [online]. [Accessed 2nd June 2022] Available at: <https://stephenfollows.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Cut-Out-of-The-Picture-Report.pdf>

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.43

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.20

result of a lack of supply of female candidates...of those registered as part of the *Young Vic Theatre's Directors Network*, 60% are women.”²⁵⁰ The statistics on female directors in U.K. film show there is a negative correlation between the proportion of female directors and the film's budget. It is also clear that the disparity in the figures, in both film and television, has nothing to do with a lack of candidates (50% women entering film school, 60% registered as part of the Young Vic's Directors Network).²⁵¹

Lexi Alexander, like Sabrina Mahfouz, refuses to be put into a box. Alexander is a martial artist who went on to become an action film director, which has taught her discipline and focus, though nothing could prepare her for the invisible enemy of prejudice that lies behind the silver screen “In martial arts, for every attack there is a counter you can throw...Somebody traps you, you can throw a hook. But there is no counter for bias in the entertainment business.”²⁵² And Alexander has had to raise her guard against combination attacks, intersectional assaults, as she defends herself against being both non-White and non-male. Although she has talked about the plight of female MENA (Middle Eastern North African) actors before, she is often asked to reflect on the barriers she faces as either being one or the other (female or MENA) because although “not all margins are equally removed from the centre”²⁵³, as Crenshaw highlights, “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism”²⁵⁴ and the effect of ‘double colonisation’ (i.e. being both female and ethnic ‘other’) can displace ethnically-diverse, female artists even further from the opportunity of work in the industry. Alexander shows awareness of such intersection when she analogises about the prejudice she faces as a female director “Can we stop being surprised? Would it be ok to stop being surprised? It's like when you hear, you know, a Black person speak and you say “You're so articulate”. That's how insulting it is. You can't keep saying to us “Wow! You make movies that are actually successful. Are you insane?!””²⁵⁵ So, can we stop being surprised? The well-

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p.51

²⁵¹ Ibid., p.8

²⁵² Lexi Alexander quoted in B. Raftery, ‘Virtuoso Action Director Lexi Alexander Fights Back Against Hollywood’ in *Wired* (August 1st, 2017) [online]. [Accessed 21st October 2020] Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/lexi-alexander-fights-back-against-hollywood/>

²⁵³ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p.156

²⁵⁴ Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’, p.140

²⁵⁵ Lexi Alexander quoted in ‘Celluloid Ceilings’ at 9 minutes 43 seconds [video: online]

known adage of ‘suspension of disbelief’ allows audience members to let slide those anomalies in character, step over holes in the plot and not be surprised to the point of disbelief so that we throw our popcorn in the air and storm out of the auditorium muttering “what a load of rubbish”, but only *once we have reached a certain point in the story whereby we have invested enough in the characters to allow such inconsistencies to pass*. This is analogous to what is going on behind the camera, whereby the industry is so far into the *story*, and *invested* so much in dominant groups (straight, White, male) for lead creative roles, that it is almost impossible for them to believe that anyone else can do it. A belief that is rooted in the mindset that someone’s talent and worth are predicated on their race and gender.

Mahfouz has also been affected by a similar mentality in both TV and theatre. In a recent tweet she draws attention to an exhaustive study carried out by the Annenberg foundation that presents statistics on portrayals of marginalised groups in 1300 U.S. films from 2007-2019.²⁵⁶ The study shows that from 2015-2019 the average prevalence of MENA characters in films analysed across this five-year period was 1.78%²⁵⁷ while “Virtually all films erased Indigenous and MENA women and girls across the 5 years evaluated.”²⁵⁸ This study highlights a lack in the portrayals of ethnically diverse characters, especially amongst women. However, when writers create such characters for stage and screen, the likelihood of the actor ethnically aligning with the character is minimal “To a White director, casting a Black Caribbean heritage actor as an Egyptian character wasn't even something to look deeper into - they were 'other' and yes of course, Egyptians can be Black too, but it is a specific ethnicity, coming primarily from Nubian and Sudanese heritage and nobody ever thought to even ask me about this.”²⁵⁹ In *The Good Immigrant*, Mahfouz outlines her diverse ethnic background but clearly states that “the largest part of my heritage is Egyptian”²⁶⁰ and yet it was not

²⁵⁶ S. Mahfouz on Twitter (Sept. 28th, 2020) [online]. [Accessed 29th September 2020] Available at: <https://twitter.com/SabrinaMahfouz/status/1310617164819423235?cxt=HHwWhoC7mclXn7AkAAAA>

²⁵⁷ Annenburg Inclusive Initiative, ‘Inequality in 1,300 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2019’ *Annenburg Foundation* (Sept., 2020) p.32 [online]. [Accessed 2nd June 2022] Available at: http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality_1300_popular_films_09-08-2020.pdf

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.3

²⁵⁹ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁶⁰ Mahfouz, ‘Wearing Where You’re At’, p.98

until her Royal Court play *A History of Water in the Middle East* in 2019 that she “felt experienced enough and right about it enough to insist on only seeing Arab heritage actors for the role.”²⁶¹ It was only until recently that she felt confident enough to insist that the ethnicity of the characters in her plays aligned with the ethnicity of the actors playing those characters.²⁶² Like many of us in a similar position, Mahfouz hopes that this particular type of colourblind casting, the type that regards ethnicities as being substitutable with ‘proximal’ ethnicities being cast in place of authentic ones, is going to change in the future. Based on her early experiences of “lazy and racist casting scenarios”²⁶³ Mahfouz realised she had the opportunity to address these concerns later in her career, when she had more power in terms of her decision making. However, while writing *Chef* in the early 2010s, which was inspired when working with female prisoners (both ex and present inmates) through a project set up by theatre company Clean Break, Mahfouz had a different set of concerns (namely class and gender) and knew that certain elements of the character of Chef would be fixed – her job title and her gender. There was no need to specify *any ethnicity*, but based on past experiences of barriers she faced when trying to be ethnically specific when writing characters, she

“wanted to make people’s bias obvious...If this could be played by any age and any ethnicity - because it could - then why would you choose who you chose?” It was also to open it up to students and those looking for monologues to practise with - to not feel that they could never do a role because they weren't whatever the writer had described them as at the beginning”²⁶⁴

Riz Ahmed is another artist and performer who struggles with perceptions based on ethnicity in the entertainment industry. Also a contributor to *The Good Immigrant*, Ahmed likens his experiences in the audition room with those he has had passing through airport security, where he has experienced more than his fair share of prejudice (sometimes physically violent) in the form of being stereotyped as an Islamic terrorist. He observes that as a young British Pakistani growing and working as an actor at the beginning of the 21st century, there are stages to the types of roles he has been called up for

²⁶¹ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁶² Compare this to Hanif Kureishi’s experiences at the Royal Court in the early 1980s, whereby they cast White actors in Brown/Asian roles for his play *Borderline*. See chapter 1, p.25.

²⁶³ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

“Stage one is the two-dimensional stereotype – the minicab driver/terrorist/cornershop owner.²⁶⁵ Stage two is the subversive portrayal, taking place on “ethnic” terrain but aiming to challenge existing stereotypes.”²⁶⁶ His role as Omar in the British satire *Four Lions* (2010), where he leads a disparate group of self-proclaimed Islamic ‘jihadists’ on a failed terrorist attack on British soil, is a good example of this second stage. However, Ahmed aspires to more, a society where these stereotypes and the challenges to them are no longer inherent within the character “stage three is the Promised Land, where you play a character whose story is not intrinsically linked to his race. There, I am not a terror suspect, nor a victim of forced marriage. There, my name might even be Dave.”²⁶⁷ Ahmed looks forward to a time when an actor’s surface skin colour does not dictate the depth of the character in a story, something that resonates with Mahfouz who believes “that [it] is generally rubbish, to demand a character look a certain way - it is very, very rarely absolutely essential to any plot.”²⁶⁸ It appears that Ahmed, very much like Williams in *Seeing a colorblind future*, is wrestling with the fact that there are different kinds of colour-blindness. And there is certainly a case that some types of colour-blindness are politically better for racialised minorities than others. A good example of this is Armando Iannucci’s *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019), whereby Iannucci “adds racial diversity to his colour-blind cast” (Lee, 2019) by casting Dev Patel (an actor from Indian heritage) as the protagonist in this Dickens adaptation.²⁶⁹ The film garnered great critical acclaim, and also highlighted how colour-blind casting can be successful when it is turned on its head i.e. casting non-White characters in traditionally White roles.

²⁶⁵ My first play *Local* was set in my father’s newsagent, which also happened to be a cornershop, but still managed to avoid stereotyping by expressing the complex antagonisms not just between the Iranian shopkeeper, Merdod, and the regular racist customer, Jeff, but also between Merdod and the rival Iranian newsagent, Ardeshir. British Asians *are* shopkeepers and minicab drivers, and one could argue that the only way to shatter such stereotypes is to thoroughly explore and represent such characters in circumstances and job roles that many first-generation immigrants found themselves when they first arrived in the UK. This is something that I investigate in some detail when analysing the play *Elmina’s Kitchen* in chapter 2

²⁶⁶ R. Ahmed ‘Airports and Auditions’ in *The Good Immigrant* (Unbound, 2016) p.98

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁶⁹ B. Lee, ‘The Personal History of David Copperfield review: Dev Patel shines in Iannucci’s charmer’ in *The Guardian* (Sept. 6th, 2019) [online]. [Accessed 29th September 2020] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/sep/06/the-personal-history-of-david-copperfield-armando-iannucci-review>

Returning to Riz Ahmed's "Dave" statement, however, I find something problematic in the way he presents his argument, almost as if he wants to eradicate the notion of ethnicity and (mis)representation in such a way as to be complicit with the way in which colour-blind casting can end up Whitewashing a text. There has been great debate recently around acronyms such as BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) and PoC (People of Colour) for the very fact that they homogenise anyone considered non-White and/or recentre Whiteness and rearticulate it as the dominant group.²⁷⁰ So why then is it so wrong to be ethnically specific when writing characters? The problem with specifying an ethnicity in the character descriptions of plays and films only in relation to 'minorities' is that it shores up the normativity of the hegemonic identity (in our case, White English) by positioning these as 'other', but avoiding it also reinforces it by re-iterating the current practices that assume it to be the norm. When Ahmed states "stage three is the Promised Land... There, my name might even be Dave", a name which suggests the ultimate White male (despite its Semitic roots), is there not a danger here then of expressing an aspiration to be part of the dominant group in Western society, that of the White/straight/male? Ahmed is a compelling, talented and accomplished creative, who clearly wants to stretch himself beyond the confines of the pigeon-hole he so often finds himself squeezed into as an actor (and proves he can in films such as *Nightcrawler*, 2014). However, Patricia J Williams incisively articulates this problem of the 'Promised Land' when she muses that "I want nothing more than to move onto the promised land of color-blind milk and honey produced by only the most qualified of worker bees. Yet...at moments like this it's so hard to imagine."²⁷¹ The case of Dev Patel portraying David Copperfield is an example of colour-blind casting that hints at this "Promised Land", unfortunately it is one example against a thousand (in recent history) that see White actors Blacking-up, or donning Native American headgear, or putting on faux Indian accents etc. Representations, as Williams clearly argues, that may have become more subtle in recent years but are still alive and kicking in the dominant, hegemonic collective un/conscious, a contemporary example of which is the image of O.J. Simpson on the front of Time magazine during the time of his now

²⁷⁰ Inc Arts UK, '#BAMEOver' in *Inc Arts UK* (2020) [online]. [Accessed 30th March 2022] Available at: <https://incarts.uk/%23bameover-the-statement>

²⁷¹ Williams, *Seeing a Colorblind Future*, p.51

infamous trial “with his skin airbrushed darker so as to achieve what they think was a certain demonic drama”²⁷²

Maybe we are stuck, for the time being, at stage two of Ahmed’s observations on stereotyping in film, television and theatre – that of challenging stereotypes – but instead of aspiring to being “Dave” maybe we need to challenge the assumption of ‘Whiteness’ as the assumed and taken-for-granted norm. The lack of particularity implied in Mahfouz’s stage direction *any ethnicity* does not suggest a homogenisation of ethnic groups outside of being White, rather it highlights an inherent bias in racial classification that when no ethnicity is ascribed to a character, they are often assumed to be White. Ahmed is possibly reiterating this, when we automatically assume that a character called “Dave” should be White, which is clearly not always the case (for example, recent multi-Brit-award winning Black, grime artist known as Dave, 2020). *Any ethnicity* is a signifier that not only emphasises that Englishness is just another identity but also the “recognition of the persistent slippage between British and White”, where British (with reference to Matthew Arnold’s Anglo-Saxon as discussed earlier) reads as English. Like the ethos of parts of the punk movement of the 1970s, it is a signifier that comments “on the limits of ethnicity and ‘race’, on the very meaninglessness of Whiteness” though not with quite the same dose of satire.²⁷³ Rather than a vague statement that negates all ethnicities, it is a bold statement that embodies Hall’s reasoning that these terms (race, ethnicity and nation) are sliding signifiers that operate discursively. It is also a stage direction that brings the very question of ethnicity to the fore and for playwrights who are trying to challenge “racist casting scenarios.” As Williams suggests, it offers a “solution to racism [that] lies in our ability to see its ubiquity but not concede to its inevitability.”²⁷⁴ Intersectional academic Sara Ahmed echoes this when she states, “The belief that racism is inevitable is how racism becomes inevitable.”²⁷⁵ Mahfouz’s *any identity* flips this ubiquity onto its head and in turn helps challenge racism’s inevitability.

²⁷² Ibid., p.20

²⁷³ P. Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: the cultural politics of race and nation* (Routledge, 2002) p.161

²⁷⁴ Williams, *Seeing a Colorblind Future*, p.68

²⁷⁵ S. Ahmed, ‘Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists’ in *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol, 12, No. 1 (March 5th, 2009) p.42

However, although the ethnicity of the character of Chef remains actively ambiguous, her gender is clearly stated as fixed as “She is the only actor”²⁷⁶ doing time in a female prison. Her gender is seemingly ‘set’, but in taking an intersectional approach to this analysis, gender cannot operate independently from other types of identity politics. Themes of gender and patriarchy dominate the script, and it is how gender intersects with ethnicity/race and class that I will now go on to investigate.

Casting Jade

Mahfouz’s choice in casting Jade to tell a female-centric story further complicates the relationship between race and neoliberalism in workplace dramas. The above interpretation of the initial stage direction *any ethnicity* as being an intervention by the author, who wishes to challenge “lazy and racist casting scenarios” and “make people’s bias obvious”, is exemplified by her casting choice. Having worked with Jade Anouka on one of her previous plays, Mahfouz, along with the director of *Chef*, Kirsty Patrick Ward “agreed it would be a straight offer to Jade.”²⁷⁷ . Anouka is an award-winning English actress and poet, born in London, to Trinidadian/Jamaican parents. Anouka wears her “melanin with pride.”²⁷⁸ Mahfouz makes it clear that Anouka was not picked based on the colour of her skin but because “she has the most exceptional way with lyrical language, seamlessly switching to any style outside or within that.”²⁷⁹ She is, as Williams would say, “the most qualified of worker bees” regardless of her racial profile. Nevertheless, what we see on stage (also as part of the paratext, as Anouka appears on the front cover of the Bloomsbury version of the play script) is a young, Black female inmate working in a prison kitchen, and the visual indicator of her race has every likelihood of being interpreted by an audience as being *part of* the context and content of the story she communicates. Anouka’s “melanin” is a part of her identity and fuels her motivation, but being Black

²⁷⁶ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.3

²⁷⁷ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁷⁸ J. Anouka, ‘Being Black, being a Woman, being ‘Other’ *TEDxPeckham* (August 22nd, 2018) at 50 seconds [video: online]. [Accessed 1st February 2021] Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/jade_anouka_being_black_being_a_woman_being_other

²⁷⁹ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

is not the only (primary) way she self-identifies. In July 2018 she was invited to speak at a TEDx talk in Peckham about being an aspirational artist. She took this opportunity to talk about her experiences as a Black, bisexual woman in the industry as well as announcing a “call to action” for those who have similar aspirations but feel disadvantaged by being ‘othered’. Anouka experiences something that Kirsten Holst Petersen and Ann Rutherford describe as ‘double colonisation’ which “refers to the fact that women are twice colonised – by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too.”²⁸⁰ There is a parallel between ‘double colonisation’ and ‘intersectionality’, the former being a subset of the latter, whereby a reliance on what Crenshaw calls “a single axis framework”²⁸¹ results in Black women being put in the position of having to choose between their race or their gender (and in Anouka’s case, their sexuality) while being continually oppressed by patriarchal and (post) colonial forces. If we choose to combat just one of these oppressive forces, patriarchy or colonialism, the outcome might be that we find ourselves upholding the other, as often “antiracism reproduces patriarchy and feminism reproduces racism.”²⁸² In taking an intersectional approach to casting, Mahfouz refutes such a choice, challenging the “single axis framework”, which Crenshaw argues has been used historically to oppress and exploit Black woman in the contemporary, Western workplace.

The notion that feminism reproduces racism was evident early in the women’s emancipatory movement. In 1851, Sojourner Truth, a Black American abolitionist and women’s rights activist, made a speech at a Women’s Rights Conference in Akron, Ohio but “When Sojourner Truth rose to speak, many White women urged that she be silenced, fearing that she would divert attention from women’s suffrage to emancipation.” Surrounded by crowds of aggressive, heckling White men, it is understandable why the White women present were wary of the negative impact that Truth speaking might have evoked. However, when Truth spoke, enunciating the powerful declaration “Ain’t I a woman?” and recounting her dehumanising experiences as a slave, she “provided a powerful rebuttal to the claim that women were categorically weaker than men.”²⁸³ Most contemporary feminists

²⁸⁰ McLeod, *Beginning postcolonialism*, p.201

²⁸¹ Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’, p.140

²⁸² A. Carastathis, ‘The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory’ in *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (April 7th, 2014) p.307

²⁸³ Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’, p.153

include theories of intersectionality as part of their discourse, recognising that power structures are based on racial hierarchy as much as patriarchy and heteronormativity, and are wary that new forms of feminism could reinforce existing systems of oppression. In a three-way conversation between Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, they discuss the relationship between post, popular and neoliberal feminism. Banet-Weiser, a critic of popular feminism, states:

that popular feminism and its exhortations to simply have more women in various cultural, political and economic realms can be read as similar to continuing liberal effort to include people of colour within a widened field of Whiteness, one that continues to shape representation, work and politics. This inclusion often comes without interrogating the racism that forms the boundaries and structures of Whiteness from the ground up²⁸⁴

If you find yourself caught outside in a raging storm, the most hostile of environments, and you are offered shelter, once inside you're unlikely to start tearing down the walls to see what they are made of. Anouka attempts to interrogate those surreptitious boundaries by expressing the limitations they have imposed on her, "women are not allowed to fail, Black women are not allowed to fail, non-straight women are not allowed to fail"²⁸⁵ This is the flipside of what of what Lexi Alexander calls the 'Crises' of Hollywood experience; Chris Hemsworth (*Thor*), Chris Pine (Captain Kirk from the remake of *Star Trek*), Chris Pratt (Star Lord from *Guardians of the Galaxy*) and Chris Evans (*Captain America*) all cast as superheroes or saviours, all White, and "they all look alike! And they all get several chances!"²⁸⁶ This, along with Anouka's statement reveals that the limitations are not determined by personal failure but rather personal allowance, walls of a shelter that don't allow breathing room for multifaceted personalities, a system that allows far fewer chances to those that exist on multiple margins. However, as Anouka goes on to express, in a poem that echoes Sojourner Truth's historic question "Ain't I a woman?", she will claim the best of both worlds while remaining a woman "I like dresses, I like shirts. I am woman. I drink pints, I drink wine. I am woman...I am soft, I

²⁸⁴ S. Banet-Weiser, R. Gill, C. Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation' in *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2020) p.10

²⁸⁵ Anouka, "Being Black, being a Woman, being 'Other'" at 7 minutes 55 seconds [video: online]

²⁸⁶ Lexi Alexander quoted in S. Li, '*Punisher: War Zone* director lauds Ed Skrein, but doubts Hollywood will change' [online]

am hard. I am woman...I'm an actor, I'm an actress. I am woman."²⁸⁷ Anouka goes on to explain that the poem was inspired by Maya Angelou, a personal heroine of hers and a writer who suffered abuse throughout her life because of her gender, race and sexuality. Like Anouka, Angelou used that subjugation as a tool for her own creativity "I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back."²⁸⁸ As much as it is vital that we are critically aware of how to defend our positionality, we must also find a way of throwing back manifestations of our complex intersecting identities to a world that often either does not acknowledge our existences, or outright negates them.

The 'shelter' from the storm analogy above is inspired by Anouka. During the TEDx talk she uses the analogy of being offered "a seat at the table" as a way of cross-examining not only the power structures that she encounters in her professional life – "when you're given that chance, that opportunity, that seat at the table, how do you use it? What do you say?" – but also her personal identity, and what that means to others in a similar position "and if you're the only one like you there, it's as if you have to speak for all women, or all Black people, or all non-straight humans. All the 'other'"²⁸⁹ In the first chapter, Kobena Mercer's notion of 'the burden of representation' was discussed in reference to critics of Hanif Kureishi, who claimed that his depiction of Pakistani characters (mostly by the Pakistani community) in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) as being greedy and immoral was prejudicial and misrepresentative. Kureishi's response at the time was perfectly reasonable in so much as he did not, indeed could not, represent the entire Pakistani community living in Thatcher's Britain. In fact, any attempt to do so would be prejudicial and immoral, as most creative writers would concur that it is their job to observe humanity and depict it as they see it. The job of judge, jury and executioner rests with the audience. Anouka has a slightly different response to this as she "feels the weight of her ancestors" and although she by no means claims to represent all Black,

²⁸⁷ Anouka, 'Being Black, being a Woman, being 'Other' at 6 minutes 36 seconds [video: online]

²⁸⁸ Quote widely attributed to Angelou though unable to locate definitive source. This version was found by A. Grant, "Maya Angelou: I've learnt" in *Failure to Listen*, 2nd Feb. 2014 [online]. [Accessed 25th July 2022] Available at: <https://failuretolisten.com/2014/02/02/maya-angelou-ive-learned/>

²⁸⁹ Anouka, 'Being Black, being a Woman, being 'Other'' at 5 minutes 17 seconds [video: online]

female, bisexual artists in Britain today, she can't help but quote her favourite superhero mantra "with great power, comes great responsibility."²⁹⁰

Yet being offered this seat at the table does not guarantee you any power, nor power to those you (whether you choose to or not) represent. For women living in these post-global-financial-crash neoliberal times, there are often illusions of power in the form of wealth and status, but they still all exist within an historic framework that stretches back to the conception of classical liberalism from which the neoliberal world order has evolved:

The inclusion of women [in dominant economic spheres] becomes the solution for all gender problems, not just those of exclusion or absence. It is, of course, important to have bodies at the table, but their mere presence doesn't necessarily challenge the structure that supports, and builds, the table in the first place; as Scott points out, merely including women does not address 'the framework of (historically contingent) dominant patterns of sexuality and the ideology that supports them.'²⁹¹

Mahfouz reads the presupposed, inherent political radicalism of theatre in a similar way, "Writers are particularly reluctant to look at their own roles in upholding racism, sexism, ageism, classism - and particularly in theatre there seems to be a strange conviction that simply by working within theatre, you are part of the progress and politically radical, even without doing anything at all that indicates this to be the case."²⁹² Unlike Kureishi, who observed and dramatized the *laissez-faire* mentality of the 1980s through a protagonist that embraced Thatcher's Great Turn, Anouka and Mahfouz question the system in which their life's dramas are played out. "Do I even want a seat at this table? Maybe I should build a new one? Is that even possible?"²⁹³ Dr. Tao Leigh Goffe, assistant professor of literary theory and cultural history at Cornell University, took the metaphor of the table to its limits and beyond in an impassioned tweet recently by stating "for me black feminist praxis is not about 'a seat at the table' next to a White man; it's another galaxy where there is no concept of a table and there are

²⁹⁰ Ibid., at 6 minutes 20 seconds

²⁹¹ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?', p.10

²⁹² Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁹³ Anouka, 'Being Black, being a Woman, being 'Other'' at 8 minutes 53 seconds [video: online]

other forms of communing not based on exclusion, which is what the table metaphor is btw...fuck the table.”²⁹⁴

Anouka does not offer concrete solutions to her questions about what to do or say when you are offered that seat at the table, however she does offer a suggestion in her call for action “when you get that chance, that opportunity that seat at the table, get creative, and remember to pull up another seat for the next person.”²⁹⁵ Throughout the TEDx talk, Anouka embodies how intersectionality can act as points of resistance to neoliberal ideology that has given rise to such rampant individualism. This is also something Anouka’s character tries to do in *Chef* when she mentors two female inmates in the prison kitchen, and is far from Kureishi’s depiction of the rise of individualism during early neoliberalism, whereby the success of our protagonist is measured by his own material gains i.e. the laundrette. He is also sexually liberated along with his White, ex-fascist lover Johnny, but Johnny’s White working-class mates are still left without work. As is the Pakistani character of Tania, the once potential marriage partner for Omar, who literally disappears from the train platform at the end of the story. In both of these instances, marginalised groups and individuals must be ousted further (even disappeared) for Omar to realise himself as a neoliberal subject in Thatcher’s new world order. However, the actions of Mahfouz’s indicator of *any ethnicity* followed by the action of her (along with director, Kirsty Patrick Ward) employing Anouka to play the role demonstrates that “If such “bottom-up” intersectional representation were routinely permitted, employees might accept the possibility that there is more to gain by collectively challenging the hierarchy rather than by each discriminatee individually seeking to protect her source of privilege within the hierarchy.”²⁹⁶ Some thirty years on from *My Beautiful Laundrette* there is more of a sense that a social approach might be one of the tools necessary to dismantle the individualist (and therefore exclusionist) mentality that early neoliberalism has embedded in our current, collective unconscious i.e. neoliberal subjectivity. In her address at the TEDx talk, Anouka offers the alternatives of either renewing the system, or taking a collectivist approach to interrogating it.

²⁹⁴ T. L. Goffe on Twitter (Sept. 20th, 2020) [online]. [Accessed 29th September 2020] Available at: <https://twitter.com/taoleighoffe/status/1307711653178413059>

²⁹⁵ Anouka, ‘Being Black, being a Woman, being ‘Other’’ at 11 minutes 18 seconds [video: online]

²⁹⁶ Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’, p.145

Reading *Chef* in terms of the intersection between race, class and gender

Chef is a solo show in the form of a lyrical monologue. During its initial run, which won an Edinburgh fringe first award before transferring to London, Mahfouz had given a straight offer to Jade Anouka, which she accepted. It has been important to situate both the writer and the actor in terms of race and gender (as well as sexuality, in the case of Jade) because not only do these inform the text in terms of its creation (Mahfouz as author) but also in terms of its reception by an audience (Anouka as performer). Mahfouz did use a lot of information gathered from “women [who] were participants in various projects for Clean Break and independent workshops both in prisons and for those who have come out.”²⁹⁷ However, as most writers will attest to, autobiographical fingerprints inevitably end up on the work. She based her debut one-woman show, *Dry Ice*, on her experience waitressing in a strip club. As has been outlined, the stage direction *any ethnicity* has direct bearing on her mixed heritage and her experiences of racially biased casting in British theatre. This is the same reason for situating Anouka in terms of her race, gender and sexuality. It is less to do with categorising and pigeon-holing her (as Jade says “don’t make boxes I don’t fit in, then try and fold me so I do”²⁹⁸) and more to do with the fact that her identity as a Black, bisexual woman has great bearing on her life and her work. Also, the audience are presented to the character of Chef as a young, Black woman, and this will have at least some influence on their interpretation of the play, as we still do not live in the “colourblind land of milk and honey” that Williams is both wary of and striving for. Whether or not, and to whatever extent, it registers with audience members, Anouka’s “melanin” is part of the performance of *Chef*. Therefore, from this point on, I will be reading the character of Chef as a Black woman (her sexuality is not referenced in the text). Having outlined the plot of *Chef*, and situated both the writer and the solo performer, my intention now is to analyse the text more closely using the concept of intersectionality. Initially, what I am looking for is a reading that explores allusions to race, gender and class, before relating these to concepts such as intersectionality and feminism and how they

²⁹⁷ Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

²⁹⁸ Anouka, ‘Being Black, being a Woman, being ‘Other’’ at 10 minutes 46 seconds [video: online]

interact with neoliberal ideology. My aim is then to conclude with thoughts on how intersectionality could be a point of resistance to the hegemonic forces of neoliberalism.

When examining the text, it soon becomes clear that Mahfouz's stage direction of *any ethnicity* holds true, as references to race or ethnicity are few and generally unrelated to the story or the character. In fact, any allusions are mostly related to food; "Coconut Curried Tofu"²⁹⁹, "local Chinese"³⁰⁰, "Yellowtail Sashimi"³⁰¹, "Manuka on iced mango"³⁰², "hibiscus jasmine sorbet"³⁰³. These are markers for Chef's culinary repertoire and experience, and although they are an indicator of her passion for her craft (which is clearly important in terms of audience engagement), beyond this they do not directly relate to the life experiences she relays. Any other racial/ethnic signifiers are geographical and connected with her father, though not a gauge of his ethnicity or race. We learn that he was once a soldier and had been on a tour in Iraq and that he now works in the "Shetland Islands...the lower Arctic middle bit of fucking nowhere."³⁰⁴ Despite there being no concrete indication of Chef's father's racial profile, as stated earlier, Anouka's parents are both Black (Trinidadian and Jamaican, respectively) and this is clearly visible in her appearance. As an audience member watching this play, it would not be great deductive leap to assume that the character of Chef's father is also Black. This assumption or deduction will become important later in the analysis. With regards to class, there are also few direct pointers. We know that Chef wants to "get off the estate" which implies, by the terminology and her ambition to escape, that it is neither an enriched nor enriching environment.³⁰⁵ Other than that, the clues to the class of the character mostly lie in the slang vernacular: "the kind ya find binded in plastic...put this cake inside your cakehole...not far from where you was born" which is consistent throughout.³⁰⁶ There are also the occasional allusions to money problems and having to hustle, "wasn't making enough money writing about food, I sold some

²⁹⁹ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.14

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.15

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.17

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p.22

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.35

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.18

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.18

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3

weed here and there but no big thing.”³⁰⁷ So textual indicators of race are primarily based around the food she prepares, while allusions to a working-class background are mostly embedded in the language. It is the direct references to a violent masculinity (and by proxy patriarchy, gender and feminism) that feature most heavily throughout the piece, which suggest that although race/ethnicity and class are important themes in the play, they are being relatively de-emphasised in order to pronounce the importance of gender.

The evolution of feminism over the past couple of centuries has manifested itself as four distinct waves. Woman’s suffrage in the 19th century is considered the first wave although, as discussed earlier with respect to Sojourner Truth’s experiences, this often had the effect of quietening the voices of Black feminists by White middle-class women for fear that “she would divert attention from women’s suffrage to emancipation.” The second wave of feminism, some hundred years later, saw the movement for equal rights for women latching onto the coat tails of the civil rights movement in the 1960s (compare Helen Reddy’s song/anthem/statement “I Am Woman” in 1970s to Sojourner Truths statement “Ain’t I a Woman?” over 120 years earlier), which resulted in sexual liberation and greater steps towards stronger roles for women throughout Western society. However, this was still a very White/Western and middle-class centric movement and it wasn’t until the late 1980s that intersectionality became entwined with feminism, in a third wave that began to recognise the integral role that women of colour had in the global feminist movement. Fourth wave feminism is where we situate ourselves today; framed by social media it seeks “justice for sexual harassment, sexual assault, bodily autonomy and equal pay” and “advocates for intersectionality at the forefront of feminist agendas.”³⁰⁸ However, fourth wave feminism (having arisen in the neoliberal era) also carries specific concerns regarding the burden of populism and neoliberal ideology, where for example “the ‘power’ in girl power” coined by pop sensation The Spice Girls in the 1990s was “almost exclusively about consumer power – not a challenge of gendered power relations and rationalities.”³⁰⁹ Before the

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p.8

³⁰⁸ C. Popeil, ‘Four Waves of Feminism Explained: Here’s How Feminism Has Changed Over Time.’ in *Entity* (June 28th, 2019) [online]. [Accessed 5th June 2022] Available at: <https://www.entitymag.com/four-waves-of-feminism-explained/>

³⁰⁹ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, ‘Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?’, p.9

character of Chef gets her break in the bistro kitchen where she learns her skills, she falls for a violent gangster. This mirrors the helplessness that Deli feels in *Elmina's Kitchen*, watching as his son (Ashley) is seduced and eventually destroyed by the 'promises' of a gangster lifestyle. However, unlike Ashley, Chef has no such paternal support structure surrounding her. The night that she decides to leave her felonious boyfriend, she drops off the gun that he's asked her to conceal, at the nightclub entrance where the woman behind the desk is reading a magazine "which was screaming about overweight faces and racist footballers who they'd still marry anyway," a sharp observation of the parallels between male White supremacism, the wealthy classes and the media-influenced 'aspirations' of young girls, in its own right.³¹⁰ Sociologist Angela McRobbie acknowledges this phenomenon as she surveys "changes in film, television, popular culture and women's magazines and demonstrates how feminist content has disappeared from them in the last decades and has been replaced by aggressive individualism, by hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality, and by obsession with consumer culture."³¹¹ Mahfouz suggests all of this in her observation about contemporary 'women's' magazines, but combined with a loss of feminist content, she is also suggesting that this mentality often goes together with a disavowal of anti-racist thinking. Not only is it suggesting that some modern women still aspire to marrying men based on their income and the security they can offer, negating feminist ideology, but that their racism can be overlooked if they are wealthy and have status. Contemporary popular culture positions itself within a neo-liberal framework that is at the very least indifferent to, if not actively embracing of (and therefore deeply complicit with) racism and sexism. Fourth wave feminism (very much like contemporary interpretations of race and class) has been, in the name of sustaining and stabilising neoliberal ideology, somewhat hijacked by contemporary popular culture, resulting in populist and more consumer-centric feminism. However, these contemporary manifestations of feminism have also "helped render feminism palatable and legitimate, which has, in turn, facilitated feminism's widespread diffusion, embrace and circulation within the Anglo-American mainstream cultural landscape."³¹² This, in turn, has given rise

³¹⁰ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.11

³¹¹ J. Oksala, 'Feminism and Neoliberal Governmentality' in *Foucault Studies* No.16, September 2013. p.40

³¹² Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?', p.8

to points of feminist resistance to dominant ideologies such as neoliberalism, as discussed later in the chapter.

The play is by no means an attack on modern women, or the pitfalls of fourth wave feminism in terms of populism and neoliberalism, but Mahfouz does take a postfeminist (deconstructive) approach in her observations. She does not act as judge, jury and executioner but rather critiques the multiple points of oppression that the character of Chef must tolerate, and she is both subtle and fierce in her critique of the patriarchal world we still live in, while continuing to feel empathetic towards the situation men like her ex-lover find themselves insofar as “he needed me to feel like this, so that I would need him, help him feel less empty. An emptiness that left him so full of soullessness that he took his own life every night.”³¹³ Chef also dreams of establishing a workplace outside of the toxic masculinity she has experienced throughout her life, where there will be “No shouting, in a well-run kitchen there’s no need for shouting. No Gordon Ramsaying around here.”³¹⁴ Here Mahfouz echoes a sentiment that Anoka expresses when talking about getting a “seat at the table” where “if no one’s listening, you don’t need to be louder, be creative”, a creativity that is expressed in the play through Chef’s culinary dexterity.³¹⁵ However, the prison kitchen Chef finds herself in is still housed in a male-dominated environment, as described through Chef’s fateful encounter with Candice, “I thought this girl needs some responsibility, some purpose, so I had some words with the governor, a man called Dave.”³¹⁶

Mahfouz makes acute social observations of contemporary women’s prisons in the U.K. when detailing the fateful story of Candice, rooting out gendered stereotypes that are adopted by the system in order to secure further funding for the “the psych rooms, which were full of women marked down as just having a ‘strange turn’ because the officials didn’t want suicide attempts counted up by governments who might take away budgets, bids, contracts even.”³¹⁷ The “contracts” referenced here are a clear indication of how much the privatising force of neoliberalism has infiltrated the public

³¹³ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.2/3

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.22

³¹⁵ Anouka, ‘Being Black, being a Woman, being ‘Other’ at 4 minutes 54 seconds [video: online]

³¹⁶ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.24

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

sector. A recent study into a governmental strategy for reform, Transforming Rehabilitation (TR), by WIP (Women In Prisons) highlighted that “The low levels of performance within the TR model are not a result of lacking standards or measures towards which to work, but of the model itself being flawed. Privatisation of probation services and the division between CRC [Community Rehabilitation Company] and NPS [National Probation Service] has fundamental difficulties for a range of reasons.” The document goes on to list these reasons, such as: implementing it before planning was complete, inadequacies in providing resources, a payment-by-results that has punitive outcomes mainly to voluntary sector organisations.³¹⁸ The last example vividly highlights the how neoliberalism has adopted a strategy of performance management that:

forms part of a kind of ‘dis-establishment’ of public service, which includes relaxing or abolishing the rules of public law that civil servants used to have to obey; replacing appointment exams by private law employment contracts; mobility between services and between public sector and private sector...A new model for the conduct of public servants tends to become established: entrepreneurial government. It is based on the principles of ‘performance management’; it mobilizes tools imported from the private sector – outcomes indicators and management of motivation through an incentives system – that make ‘hands-off management’ of conduct possible.³¹⁹

This type of ‘hands-off management’ is succinctly articulated by the governor “Dave” when he hands all responsibility for Candice over to Chef

“okay, give her a permanent kitchen position,

But don’t let her near the knives!

Sign here and here to prove I’ve said what I’ve said

³¹⁸ S. Gullberg, ‘A response to the Justice Select Committee inquiry into the Government’s Transforming Rehabilitation Programme’ *Women in Prisons* (November 17th, 2017) p.3 [online]. [Accessed 5th June 2022] Available at: <https://womeninprison.org.uk/media/downloads/Transforming-Rehabilitation.pdf>

³¹⁹ P. Dardot, C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal society* (Kindle Edition, Verso, 2013) [Location 5717 of 7830]

*And good luck, Chef*³²⁰

The neoliberal prison system is financially better off if one of the female inmates is recorded as having a ‘strange turn’ than a suicide attempt, but when Candice does take the blade in Chef’s hand to take her own life and succeeds, then

*“we would rather deal with a suicide fine
than get marked down with murder in the annual report”*³²¹

When I asked Mahfouz to elaborate more on what she meant about the reading of an inmate’s mental health as leaping from a ‘strange turn’ to a suicide attempt then to attempted murder, she said “it means they do not have to sign up for ‘suicide watch’, which entails a one-on-one officer with an inmate 24 hours a day... This does not come with the urgent psychiatric help that is needed, except in rare cases, despite the exorbitant costs of one-to-one ‘watch’.” And with reference to suicide attempts, she added, “Attempts are also used as statistics, so when private prisons are rebidding for contracts, the lower the figures on all these self-harm incidents are, the better for their presentations.”³²² The ultimate well-being of the inmates is overridden by monetary loss and gain. The case of Candice is closed because they “*would rather deal with a suicide fine*” than murder, which would have a serious effect on the overall ‘performance management’ of the prison. It doesn’t even begin to account for the tragic and possibly unnecessary loss of human life, as well as the long-lasting damage the incident will inevitably have on Chef and the consequences thereafter. These decisions, founded on neoliberalism, are determined by the governor, a man called Dave. In a prison where the inmates are all female, it is the patriarchy that controls their fate, including passing on accountability when the outcome might destabilise their positions of power, “you signed and Dave said you know she’s your responsibility, it’s your responsibility.”³²³ Doubly reinforced at the beginning and at the end of this statement, human life is diminished to a contract of deferred responsibility, where “she” is reduced to

³²⁰ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.24

³²¹ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.35-36

³²² Email correspondence with Sabrina Mahfouz.

³²³ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.26

“it” by a man call Dave. However, Chef’s world is not only dominated by men inside the prison, but it has been determined by the men in her life before prison, including the reason she is incarcerated.

Both Candice and the character of Chef have come from homes where they have experienced domestic violence, as outlined earlier. It is a focus on the consequences of domestic violence and how it manifests with regards to the intersectional experience that I would now like to turn. “[T]he location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender,” writes Crenshaw, “makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of White women”³²⁴ As there is no suggestion otherwise, I am making the assumption that Chef’s father is her biological father (as it is never stated otherwise in the script), and therefore he is also Black. This is important with regards to the following analysis which considers the intersectional experience of domestic violence. Crenshaw uses the example of the film *The Color Purple* (1986) and the criticism it received for the depiction of domestic violence in Black households. The book on which the film was based is written by Alice Walker, an African American novelist. The screenplay was written by Menno Meyjes and directed by Steven Spielberg, two White men. It was as a result of these auspices that the film came under fire from the Black community, mostly, from Black men. As Willis Edwards, president of the Hollywood/Beverly Hills branch of the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), observes “for the Black male, the movie is very degrading.”³²⁵ Although the stereotyping of Black males (lazy, violent, neglectful) is an ongoing issue with regards to their representation in the media and public sphere, Crenshaw raises another problem with this kind of focus:

The controversy over the movie *The Color Purple* is illustrative. The animating fear behind much of the publicized protest was that by portraying domestic abuse in a Black family, the movie confirmed the negative stereotypes of Black men. The debate over the propriety of presenting such an image on the screen overshadowed the issue of sexism and patriarchy in

³²⁴ K. Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color’ in *Stanford Law Review*, Vol.43, No.6 (July, 1991) p.1245

³²⁵ J. Mathews, ‘Some Blacks Critical of Spielberg’s ‘Purple’ in *The Los Angeles Times* (December 20th, 1985) [online]. [Accessed 5th June 2022] Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-12-20-ca-5050-story.html>

the Black community...The struggle against racism seemed to compel the subordination of certain aspects of the Black female experience in order to ensure the security of the larger Black community.”³²⁶

Crenshaw does not argue that the negative stereotyping of Black men in mainstream culture is not an issue, rather that anti-racist focus on this issue results in the erasure of Black women from the equation as “Crenshaw contended that mainstream feminist and anti-racist organization rendered DV [domestic violence] towards Black women effectively invisible”³²⁷

This becomes pertinent when looking at the circumstances that Chef finds herself in as a young, Black, female inmate, and relating it to the real-world examples (in line with the workshops with inmates that Mahfouz used as a foundation for the text). Towards the end of the play, Mahfouz interweaves Chef’s experience of “the questioning from prison officials over Candice’s apparent suicide” and “the court trial she faced for her dad’s murder.”³²⁸ The interconnectedness of these events is expressed in the braided form the narrative takes, not only here but throughout the play, articulating a “continuum of violence” relating to domestic abuse.³²⁹ The findings of a recent study on the challenges facing domestic violence survivors using an intersectional framework for analysing domestic violence policy and practice, “reveal that the intersection of gender, class, ‘race’ and immigration status have a major impact on the effectiveness of the support provided to DV victims.”³³⁰ The findings of the study provide “an empirical basis for challenging criminal justice policies that ignore how other factors, such as ‘race’...can increase the likelihood of criminal justice sanctions...for survivors.”³³¹ Gender is a given in these case studies as the sample group are female “perpetrators”. One such challenge is with regards to a continuum of violence, whereby “the vast majority of women taking part in a perpetrator recovery program had committed violence in the

³²⁶ Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’, p.163

³²⁷ A. S. Day, A. K. Gill, ‘Applying Intersectionality to Partnerships Between Women’s Organisations and the Criminal Justice System in Relation to Domestic Violence in *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume 60, No. 4 (Feb. 22nd, 2020) p.832

³²⁸ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.32

³²⁹ Day and Gill, ‘Applying Intersectionality to Partnerships’, p.843

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.831

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p.846

context of being abused themselves.”³³² The evolution of victim to perpetrator is often the reason given for cycles of violence, and this is no different in the case of Chef’s prosecution over her father’s euthanasia.

“Do you accept that you didn’t like your father much?

We accept that he didn’t appear to like you.

Beat you, left you

One time it looks like you almost died...

*We, the prosecution, put forward that revenge is a clear motive.”*³³³

This is also linked, in the text and in terms of the criminal justice system, to the prison officials questioning over the incident involving Candice “*maybe you were glad when Candice asked you for help, like your dad did?*”³³⁴ What becomes clear in Chef’s case is that the theory of a “continuum of violence” is used by the Criminal Justice System to reinforce the prosecution against her by linking the deaths of Candice and her father, but without considering that domestic violence, as Hester asserts “is a gendered pattern of behaviour that develops over time.”³³⁵ Very little attention is paid to the paternal violence both Candice and Chef endured, which had a direct impact on their life trajectories and clearly had some influence on them being incarcerated in the first place. Instead, the focus is on relating Chef’s actions towards her father (aiding in his euthanasia) and her ‘actions’ that resulted in Candice’s death. As the maxim goes, violence begets violence but, as Kelly proposes “rather than focusing on different forms of abuse and women’s responses to them as discrete issues, it would be more effective to explore specific abuses as part of a continuum of violence; only this conceptualization illuminates the commonalities between women’s experiences to demonstrate how all are underpinned by patriarchal power and control.”³³⁶ This is echoed in Chef’s rebuttal “I wanted him out of my life but that doesn’t mean I needed him to die.”³³⁷ Chef wanted to break the cycle of her father’s control over her, but by her own admission, never by violence.

³³² Ibid., p.841

³³³ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.33

³³⁴ Ibid., p.32

³³⁵ Day and Gill, ‘Applying Intersectionality to Partnerships’, p.843

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.34

The conflation of Chef's motive for aiding her father's euthanasia and her involvement in Candice's suicide, which focuses on the recent and discrete instance of female-on-female violence rather than the continuous lifetime of paternal violence both of these women faced, reflects how "women's organisations' re-conceptualization of survivors as perpetrators of individual crimes combines feminist conceptions of the dynamics of DV's with an incident-led approach more commonly found in the justice system. However, this does little to challenge the growing injustice of criminalized survival, rather accepting and reinforcing it."³³⁸ Efficiency becomes a key motivator here. It is an easy way for the criminal justice system to over-simplify circumstances, thereby reducing time spent on individual cases, which goes for both private and public prisons as neoliberalism seeks to make "the state itself a sphere governed by rules of competition and subject to efficiency constraints similar to those experienced by private enterprises."³³⁹ Both Chef and Candice fall victim to a penal system that is becoming increasingly dictated by the neoliberal ideology of competition and efficiency, and although we have no indication of Candice's ethnicity, it is reckless to remain colour-blind to Chef's position as a Black woman, as Patricia Williams articulates in her critique of a colour-blind future "The values of a resolutely efficient market place are not always compatible with the principles of fairness."³⁴⁰ This fairness equates to a justice and equality that needs to recognise some women are burdened with multiple marginalised identities which often require further investigation. It is by this approach that institutions such as the Criminal Justice System could alter their decision and policy making from one which, for the sake of efficiency, continues to be based primarily on "an incident-led approach" that renders "DV [domestic violence] towards Black women effectively invisible", to one that considers individual cases on an intersectional basis.³⁴¹

³³⁸ Day and Gill, 'Applying Intersectionality to Partnerships', p.843

³³⁹ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 5187 of 7830]

³⁴⁰ Williams, *Seeing a Colorblind Future*, p.66/67

³⁴¹ As recently as May 2022, UK Home Secretary Priti Patel, released a statement ratifying the Istanbul Convention regarding Violence Against Women and Girls by "strengthening our legislative framework" and introducing "a wide range of tools to protect victims better." However, "Article 78(2) of the Convention allows countries to make a reservation on certain provisions of the Convention", whereby the UK will be "applying a reservation on Article 59, which relates to migrant victims" rendering cases of DV towards migrant women effectively invisible. P. Patel, 'Ratification of the Istanbul Convention' in *UK Parliament* (May 17th, 2022) [Accessed 15th June 2022] Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2022-05-17/hcws34>

Conclusion

It is difficult at this juncture of neoliberal society, that we now find ourselves in, to consider intersectionality in ways other than multiple points of oppression. However, it is also necessary to formulate ways of adopting intersectional theory to create conditions that also resist neoliberal ideology, as well as possibilities for those most affected by intersectionality. In a post global-financial-crash world, the bottomless pit of cash that free market economics promised has been revealed as the most precarious of constructs. The privatisation of the public sector over the past few decades inherited that precarity, and the result is reduced financial support for some of the most vulnerable in society, and often those that are burdened by multiple aspects of marginalisation. “The lower classes are highly racialized and the increasing feminization of poverty has been a notable feature of neoliberalization.”³⁴² It is worth noting at this point that class, as a historical experience, has always been raced, as Young points out when referring to John Beddoe’s *The Races of Britain*, “In Beddoe the phenomenon of Irish immigration is extended to the observation that the spawning working class in general tends to be darker than the upper classes.”³⁴³

New forms of feminism, in the shape of popular culture and neoliberal governmentality, have resulted in the gradual erosion of a once hoped for collective and radical feminism. However, there has been a resurgence in this collectivist ideology as contemporary academics and activists are asking “how can we sustain and broaden this feminist renaissance as resistance, while rejecting the logic of neoliberal feminism[?]”³⁴⁴ This consumerist appropriation of feminism has undoubtedly seen women attain greater power and status in the private sector through the promotion of aggressive competition and individualism, though often at the expense of any possibility of nurturing a collective resistance and resulting in a neglect of those working in the public sector (despite neoliberalism’s claim of dissolving the boundary between the public and the private). However, as Aviah Sarah Day and Aisha

³⁴² Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.202

³⁴³ R. Young, *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008) p.138

³⁴⁴ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, ‘Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?’, p.18

Gill have articulated in their work on women's prison, more resources would need to be allocated in order to properly assess cases of intersectionality, such as those represented by characters like Chef, so that "feminist resistance to neoliberalism would ultimately have to mean deliberately pushing back the encroachment of the social by the economic with a broader vision of politics and of the good life."³⁴⁵ Such oppositional feminist groups do already exist, such as Global Women's Strike and Feminism for the 99%, collectives that "challenge and even threaten neoliberalism by demanding dramatic economic, social and cultural transformation... they very consciously attempt to include and address inequalities that expand, in significant ways, the single analytic frame of gender...regarding a dizzying array of inequalities facing women, minorities and precarious populations"³⁴⁶ This expanded horizon "of politics and the good life" must be intersectional precisely because life itself is intersectional, and the continuing focus of greater equality and justice along only one axis of identity is necessarily a very limited form of justice, a very attenuated form of equality. Justice and equality for *some* cannot claim to be any kind of justice or equality at all.

In the final scene of *Chef* we return to her passion for cooking. The character has finished relaying the interwoven prosecution brought against her for both the death of her father and Candice and is preparing *Red berries with hibiscus jasmine sorbet*. It unfolds as a metaphor for the two-fold tragedy that has befallen a character who has had to accommodate a 'double colonisation' throughout her life, while experiencing the erasure of her intersectional identity as being both Black and a woman. During the preparation of this final dish, she handles the berries with the utmost care as they "leave trails of their sweet insides on the plate if you don't treat them delicately enough."³⁴⁷ While on the surface this alludes to the somewhat hackneyed metaphor of race only being skin deep, as scratching the surface reveals that our blood leaves trails very much like the "sweet insides" of the red berries, it also possibly points towards a more profound articulation; that is, a society grounded on the ethics of care. The care that Chef displays (whether it is in preparing dishes, mentoring her in-kitchen staff, or protecting her gangster boyfriend, even euthanising her terminally-ill father) acts as a

³⁴⁵ Oksala, 'Feminism and Neoliberal Governmentality', p.50

³⁴⁶ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism?', p.18

³⁴⁷ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.35

counterpoint to the ideology of competition that forms the bedrock of neoliberalism, where it suggests that “governments should foster caring connections between persons and limits on the markets that undermine them.”³⁴⁸ This “ethics of care” also takes into consideration intersectionality and how this relates to the notion of ‘fairness’ in Western courts of law, allowing us the insight to “recognize domains in which the legal/judicial framework of traditional moralities and the assumption that we are free, equal, autonomous individuals are appropriate, but we can recognize how these ways of thinking should not be imagined to be suitable for all of human life.”³⁴⁹ Enlightened ideas of universalism (a universalism that neoliberal ideology encourages through the construction of the neo-subject) need to be accompanied by (if not replaced with) considerations of intersectionality, if we are to live in a society that accounts for, and treats equally, the complex, nodal individuals that live within it.

The character of Chef is capable of her own societally inferred prejudice and stereotyping as she reveals that she made an assumption about the identity of her recently deceased friend “Candice said her favourite drink was hibiscus tea. Strange as she struck me a PG Tips girl, but you never can tell really, can you?”³⁵⁰ This can be read as a reference to class, PG Tips for the working-class, hibiscus for the middle-classes, but even Chef cannot pinpoint everyone’s identity, although she does have the insight and humility to admit so. The way we categorise others and ourselves is not fixed, as the boundaries of identity are constantly moving. Furthermore, the intersection of multiple aspects of our identities means that they are ever unstable and undergoing constant renewal. In her final lines Chef concludes that our differences are often nothing more than the choices we make in the moment:

“It’s up to whoever eats the dish to decide

if the berries go in the sorbet

or stay divided –

give them the choice.

There should always be a choice,

³⁴⁸ V. Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2006) p.119

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.120

³⁵⁰ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.35

Shouldn't there?"³⁵¹

Whether we choose to keep things separate, or put things side by side, as with the sorbet eventually they all end up mixed together. It is important to consider and acknowledge the separate ingredients, as well as how they combine to form new and innovative dishes. As Williams articulates towards the end of her book, this is about the constant interplay between maintaining and dissolving barriers, “On the one hand, how do we maintain the rituals, the mother tongues, the intimacies that reinforce the boundaries of what keeps us sane? On the other, how do we remain open to the possibility that my [Black] son may want to marry your [White] daughter?”³⁵² For all the fraught experiences and anxieties that accompany being from a mixed heritage background, it was my mother’s choice to travel to Iran in the 1970s that made my existence possible. It was her choice to lower the cultural boundaries, to learn the language and traditions of a country that, in my lifetime, has been at the worst political odds with the United Kingdom and the West. A political division driven by neo-colonial ambition related to Iranian oil reserves. Of course, my mother could not have predicted this future, but really that is the point. She was not making these choices based on presumptions, or predictions, or ‘best outcomes. She was making these choices based on what she cared for, how she felt and who she loved. And my father’s family, her Iranian family, loved her back because they recognised that.

As with my mother’s bold move, by which she complicated her English identity not only by living in, but becoming part of the fabric of a foreign country for almost ten years, Chef also has to make choices that she knows will challenge her very existence. Choice in neoliberal society promotes competition and allows free-market ideology to proliferate. It is not choice itself that is the problem, rather the highly ideological way in which it is mobilised by neoliberal ideology as a synonym for “freedom”, which reduces freedom to the fetishized and flattened concept it is now commonly understood to be. However, Chef clearly defines her choices based on empathy for others rather than the notion of individual freedom. The choice to euthanise her father was not an easy one, on several levels, but she opted to help a man that had a hugely negative impact on her life, despite knowing that she could be (and was) incarcerated for doing so. The choice to allow Candice into her kitchen,

³⁵¹ Ibid., p.36

³⁵² Williams, *Seeing a Colorblind Future*, p.69

despite being told about her vulnerabilities and capricious nature, was not born from any financial or professional ambition but rather that she recognised that this girl “needs some responsibility, some purpose” otherwise she would just end up as another woman admitted into the psych rooms “being marked down as just having a ‘strange turn.’”³⁵³ Chef is a prisoner in an all-female prison, where the rules of a neoliberalism do not apply in exactly the same way as civil society, but still dictate the lives of the inmates, and increasingly so in an ever-privatising public sector. However, Chef’s choices both within and without the prison, do not appear to be dictated by neoliberal ideology. Though being highly detrimental to the trajectory of her life path as determined by the society we live in, a society which upholds a judicial system that does not account for (and even erases) individuals that do not align with a “single-axis framework”, Chef makes choices based on the collective rather than the individual, on care rather than competition, and even on the needs of others over her own.

³⁵³ Mahfouz, *Chef*, p.24

Conclusion – a case against neoliberalism

The central question from the outset of this thesis was, at least initially, relatively broad: to what degree do English workplace plays, written and set in neoliberal society, represent race and racism as being integral to neoliberal ideology? When first considering the parameters of the study, it quickly became clear that concepts of race and class (reading neoliberalism as “the process of restoration of class power”³⁵⁴) are profoundly interrelated, evidence of which peppers our history - from the pseudo-scientific theories from the 18th/17th century which claimed a hierarchy of races in order to justify the merciless and highly lucrative slave trade, to my Iranian father and I working in the family newsagent in the 1990s while regularly having to put up with clichés like “*they* come over here and steal our jobs” (often quickly followed by “I don’t mean you, of course”), right up to the documented pay gap in the 21st century between BAME (Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic) and White employees both in the public³⁵⁵ and private sector.³⁵⁶ As these examples highlight, the way in which ideologies of race and mechanisms of racism operate in a society, suggests that “Racial classification systems themselves have a history”³⁵⁷ and, as we have seen with the rise of neoliberalism from the ashes of Keynesian ‘social’ economics, the notion of class is also historically contingent. Therefore, it was important to narrow the case studies to the neoliberal era, the past four decades, choosing dramas from different phases of this epoch; the ‘Great Turn’ of the early 1980s that marked the beginning of the new economic world order, the turn of the millennium that signified a time when neoliberalism had firmly established itself in Western society, and the world of the post-global financial crisis that came about as a direct result of neoliberal policy.³⁵⁸ However, as well as being dependent on history, concepts of

³⁵⁴ D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p.62-63

³⁵⁵ No author cited, ‘Gender and BAME pay gap report’ *Westminster City Council* (2019) p.7-8 [online].

[Accessed 27th July 2021] Available at:

<https://www.westminster.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/documents/Gender%20and%20bame%20pay%20gap%20report%202019.pdf#:~:text=The%20BAME%20pay%20gap%20is%20the%20difference%20between,and%20commit%20to%20narrow%20the%20gap%20over%20time>.

³⁵⁶ N. Morris, ‘BAME pay gap figures – where’s the outrage?’ in *gal-dem* (July 19th, 2018) [online]. [Accessed 26th July 2021] Available at: <https://gal-dem.com/bame-pay-gap-figures-wheres-outrage/>

³⁵⁷ S. Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Kindle Edition, 2017) [Location 755 of 3058]

³⁵⁸ H. Overbeek, B. Van Apeldorn, *Neoliberalism in Crisis* (Palgrave MacMillan UK, 2012) p.167

race and class are also geographically contingent and, as such, a further narrowing of case studies was required.

Shopping around – choosing the cultural parameters for the case studies

There are examples of workplace plays from across the globe, written and set in the early neoliberal era. David Henry Hwang's *F.O.B.* (1980) is set in a Chinese restaurant in California, which dramatises the conflict between established Asian-Americans and the newly arrived *fresh off the boat* Asian immigrants. In this way, it can be said to draw parallels with the themes of intra-racial conflict in *Elmina's Kitchen*, explored in the second chapter of the thesis. Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli: City of Gold* (1979) documents the lives of two migrant workers in South Africa, exploring themes of Black exploitation and the dominant racist ideology that pervades that region of the world. David Mamet's workplace overture to neoliberal society, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), depicts Chicago real estate agents living by the mantra ABC (Always Be Closing) who go to unethical lengths to secure the prime leads that are usually reserved for the top seller in the company. Wendy Lill's *The Occupation of Heather Rose* (1985) is an outstanding dramatic monologue about a White, American nurse on long term placement at a remote Ontario native reserve. She tries to bring White-American ideas about healthy eating and exercise regimes to the destitute/unemployed natives and attempts to form a bond with an indigenous mother and her daughter, but eventually fails them catastrophically, highlighting how issues of race create barriers that bonds of feminism cannot overcome. "By showing the settler woman's complicity in the ongoing colonisation of indigenous peoples, the play disproves the common assumption that the bonds of gender between white and native women will somehow diminish their differences."³⁵⁹ Complications of the intersection between race, class and feminism is something I explore in my third chapter, and although *The Occupation of Heather Rose* is incredibly adept at highlighting such nuances, it is a 'settler' play that speaks from the point of the coloniser, without any distinctive voice coming from the colonised.

³⁵⁹ H. Gilbert, J. Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1996) p.125

Although these works fit the parameters in terms of being plays about work set at the beginning of the neoliberal era, it became clear that race (and class) play out differently under different material conditions i.e. in different cultures and countries. For example, Stuart Hall argues that “British racism has become, specifically, a racism for the working classes and the petty--bourgeoisie.”³⁶⁰ Patricia J. Williams, while not wanting to overstate the cultural differences between America and Britain, observes that “the United States does deem itself classes with almost the same degree of self-satisfaction that the United Kingdom prides itself on being largely free of a history of racial bias” and before the reader can raise an eyebrow at the glaring fallacy of these collective, national delusions, she quickly adds that “the noblest denials are at least as interesting study as the highest ideals.”³⁶¹ What these observations of cultural specificity based on nation suggested, is that restricting my investigation to English workplace dramas would give the overall analysis much greater focus. Richard Bean’s *Under the Whaleback* (2002) documents the lives of three generations of White, working-class Hull trawlermen, and seemed to fit all of the parameters I had established so far; race, class, nation. However, and as with lack of “distinctive voice” in *Heather Rose*, this raised one final but vital question regarding factors that would determine the limits of my source material – the importance of representation.³⁶² I wanted to examine how the phenomena of race and class played out against my own experiences as a first-generation, Anglo-Iranian playwright, working in the family newsagent in Wolverhampton during the neoliberal era. I also believe that the positionality of an

³⁶⁰ In the paragraph following this quote, Hall goes on to qualify this statement from a Marxist, materialist perspective “I hope I will not be misunderstood as attributing an innate and universal “racism” to the working class or indeed to any other class as such in the British social formation. The burden of my remarks has been to resist this universal, psychological attribution of a “racist human nature,” and concentrate specifically on the concrete process and circumstances which have produced an indigenous British racism, the real and specific problems to which racism provides a displaced mode of address, the “real” conditions of existence which are misrepresented in the apparently explanatory power of popular racism.” S. Hall, *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* (Duke University Press, 2021) p.69

³⁶¹ P. J. Williams, *Seeing a Colorblind Future: The Paradox of Race* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) p.34

³⁶² The way the foreign Other is portrayed by White authors these plays was one of the first things to inspire me to embark on this thesis; the ‘miserly’ Patels in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the ‘pervy’ Kurds in *Under the Whaleback*, the ‘greedy, corporate’ Japanese in *Gagarin’s Way*. The list goes on, and although this is no damning indictment against the authors, it is worth noting that it was Edward Said quoting Marx - “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.” - at the start of his seminal work, *Orientalism*, that was initial spark for this whole investigation. The foreign Other in these White-authored plays are offstage characters, who are represented by the White characters onstage. I felt my study necessitated having the foreign Other on stage, as central characters, represented by authors with the same/similar heritage.

author is paramount (critically speaking) when they tackle issues surrounding their own marginalisation. It is for this reason that I chose to focus on playwrights with non-European immigrant heritage, writing workplace plays set in England during the neoliberal era, in the hope that it would not only sharpen the focus of the analysis but also give the writing a greater resonance.

Taking stock – the evolution of racialised identities in workplace dramas across the neoliberal era

In the first chapter, and through the lens of Hanif Kureishi's screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette*³⁶³, I contest the claims made by proponents of early neoliberalism that this new economic world order promises to do away with the outmoded and divisive forms of racial categorisation from the past, by replacing allegiances rooted in social identity, with ambition embedded in individual enterprise.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the rise of neoliberalism on a global scale ran concurrently with an emergent Asian middleclass in the U.K. This was a racial group that were seemingly, often fervently, embracing the new world order established by Reaganite economics, although the reality was that a lot of them were driven to self-employment because of racist exclusion as working-class employees.³⁶⁴ Neoliberalism's claim of prioritising 'individual enterprise' over 'social identity' was irrefutable. However, its ideological champions were only concerned with the former, believing that if individuals embraced their new found identity as entrepreneur, then old allegiances to (therefore, by proxy, grievances with) racial groups could simply be swept under the carpet. However, for Omar (protagonist) this 'ambition' affords him new power and social status, which he does not hesitate in using to subjugate his one-time-enemy-come-lover and ex-fascist, Johnny. It is in those instances of peak conflict between the beaus when Omar reveals his true *racialised* motives, the power he wields over Johnny acting as a form of revenge and reparation for the violent, racist attacks that Johnny subjected him to in younger years. Although neoliberalism tries to destroy symbolic forms (such as family, religion, social classes) and collective identities (such as race) it often, simply either supresses

³⁶³ Although I attempted to source stage plays exclusively for all three of my case studies, I also had to locate dramas that would fit with my now suitably narrow parameters.

³⁶⁴ This groups consisted mostly of Indians and Pakistanis. They made up a relatively large part of the Asian diasporic population in the UK as a result of the Empire and the Partition of India, but it also consisted of Asian 'anomalies' like my Iranian father, who the locals were happy to call a 'Paki' despite knowing nothing of his heritage.

them, or reconstitutes them. This then results in the return of the repressed, causing identity politics to rise up in more malignant forms, as expressed in the reversal of the power dynamic between Omar and Johnny.

Elmina's Kitchen depicts an exclusively Black world (there are no White characters specifically depicted in the play, on or offstage) in a West Indian takeaway, situated in Hackney's 'Murder Mile' at the turn of the millennium. In this chapter I hoped to highlight how, at a time when neoliberal society had established itself in England, postcolonial resistances to essentialist notions of racial identities through mechanisms such as 'authenticity', 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' have been adopted by neoliberal ideology, creating divisions within racial categories. The homogenisation of racial groups has long been a tool of racist ideology, reinforcing the distinction between 'Us' and 'Them', and postcolonial/anti-racist reasoning has always tried to uphold that any 'authentic' (read: undifferentiated) notion of a racial group (through systems of hybridity and mimicry) is a fallacy. However, in neoliberal society - with competition as its bedrock - difference within racial groups manifests as rivalry between individuals in the Black community, rather than as resistance to a racist, dominant ideology. This is emphasised through characters such as Digger, who 'mimics' different accents from within Black culture "from his native Grenadian to hardcore Jamaican to authentic Black London", not primarily as a resistance to the concept of an 'authentic' White identity, but dependent on which Black clients he is doing business with.³⁶⁵ Throughout the play, most of the characters use racialised terms/slurs ("British Black", "White boy", "rhated Englishman") against one another, and often in the context of disputed finances.³⁶⁶ Hybridity, which should be an operation that creates unique, new identities through cultural crossover, is instead adopted by Deli (protagonist) in a neoliberal environment, to promote and improve his business (posters of African-American heroes hocking Budweiser beer, sweet and sour chicken West Indian style). Ultimately it is Deli's embrace of neoliberal ideology, an evolution of classical liberalism/early capitalism with roots that flourished in England as a direct result of the Black Atlantic slave trade, that sees him reject his Black heritage and

³⁶⁵ K. Kwei-Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen* in *Kwei-Armah Plays: 1* (Bloomsbury, 2009) p.6

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16

adopt the identity of neo-subject.³⁶⁷ This ‘hijacking’ of postcolonial resistances to White, dominant ideology by neoliberalism, instead creates a hyper individualism that sees characters rejecting any sense of shared racial heritage and replacing it with omnipotent economic competition, resulting in the ultimate human cost – the murder of Deli’s son by Digger.

The first two chapters were based on dramas I am, historically, well acquainted with.³⁶⁸ I concluded that were the best case studies for an analysis of how neoliberalism interacts with raise, creating more virulent and divisive forms of racialised identification, which go on to create wider fault lines and greater conflict both between and within racialised groups. However, it became apparent that these literary examples were limited in their own right. They are both essentially works of naturalism, and I wanted to examine how the central question of the thesis is affected (if at all) by a change in dramatic form. However, and most importantly, these are essentially all-male worlds that depict how neoliberal competition creates conflict within a gender that is already steeped in ideas of individualism and competition outside of neoliberal society (observed in phrases such as “self-made man” and “lone wolf”). And despite *Laundrette* offering some resistance to neoliberalism through ‘alternative’ sexuality (i.e. non-heteronormative sexuality) both dramas end in ruination. If I was to deliberate on how race and racism interact with neoliberalism, then I needed to consider how gender might complicate this interaction, and whether a female playwright’s perspective might depict a different outcome i.e. something other than destruction, and possible even a way to progress constructively. In the third chapter, which focuses Sabrina Mahfouz’s *Chef*, I explore the concept of intersectionality and how women of colour have to face a “double colonisation.”³⁶⁹ Using the form of a lyrical monologue, *Chef* documents the life of a female inmate in an all-women’s prison, although, still run by men. It highlights how the neoliberal model, with its origins in the patriarchally conceived model of classical liberalism, has been adopted by the prison services, prioritising ‘efficiency and

³⁶⁷ B. Hesse, ‘Escaping Liberty: Western Hegemony, Black Fugitivity’ in *Political Theory*, Vol 42, No. 3 (2014) p.304

³⁶⁸ I have used clips from *My Beautiful Laundrette* and the entire text of *Elmina’s Kitchen* in my teachings at Wolverhampton University for the past two decades.

³⁶⁹ J. McLeod, *Beginning postcolonialism* (Manchester University Press, 2010) p.201

performance management’ over the well-being of the inmates.³⁷⁰ Chef asks to take on board two apprentices, one of which has been highly damaged by her horrific experiences in civilian life, and uses one of the knives in the kitchen to take her own life. The denouement of the play results, much like the other two case studies, in tragedy. However, it is Chef’s enduring belief that she should have and will continue (if ever given the chance again) to give women like this the opportunity to bolster their self-worth through discovering and developing a specialised skill. It also offers a possible resistance to neoliberal thinking by foregrounding a ‘duty of care’ over hyper-individualism and competition.

Shutting up shop

It feels apt to end where I began, with Dardot and Laval’s definition of the neo-subject, and the resulting shift in what Lacan calls the ‘symbolic order’:

“One day they are invited to change cars, the next to change partners, the next their identity, and another day their sex, in accordance with the mechanism of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Should we therewith deduce a ‘de-symbolization of the world’? (Dufour, 2003) It would probably be more accurate to say that the symbolic structure is subject to instrumentalization by capitalist economic logic.”³⁷¹

I hope the work here answers my initial question - as to whether or not categorisation based on race, and the racism that results from such categorisation, are integral to neoliberal policy – in the resounding affirmative. Not only does neoliberalism fail to achieve what it claims, in doing away with a “fixation with identity”. Rather, by ignoring the historic mechanisms, on which its origins in classical liberalism and capitalism, are based (slavery, free labour, and cheap labour) it has ignored the potency of such a legacy which has now boiled to the surface in the form of nativism, protectionism and a rise in more ferocious and menacing forms of racial identity politics.³⁷² Not only

³⁷⁰ P. Dardot, C. Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal society* (Kindle Edition, Verso, 2013) [Location 5187 of 7830]

³⁷¹ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World* [Location 6988 of 7830]

³⁷² In one sense, nativism and protectionism are the two sides of the coins I have attempted to address in this study, and are perfectly summed up in the cliché “they come over here, take our jobs.”

this, but it is often been the tool in the “instrumentalization” of racist ideology both between and within racialised groups, while continuing to overlook women of colour in its failure to “include and address inequalities that expand, in significant ways, the single analytic frame of gender.”³⁷³ This leaves the question: if we want to overcome racism, homophobia, sexism etc. do we need to overcome and progress beyond neoliberal ideology? The question more pertinent to our present condition is: if we adopt a neoliberal mindset, can we ever truly overcome these deeply embedded, oppressive and discriminatory ways of thinking?

³⁷³ S. Banet-Weiser, R. Gill, C. Rottenberg, ‘Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation’ in *Feminist Theory* Vol. 21, No. 1 (2020) p.18

Three Workplace Plays (with Contextual Introductions)

What follows are the three stage plays that make up the creative element of this PhD, although I use the word ‘creative’ broadly, as the hope is the subsequent pieces of theatre both exhibit and stimulate critical thinking as much as the concepts explored in the critical section provoke debate. Creative work should be able to stand alone; a singular unit of expression that exists in the world, only coming into being through the strength of its own suggestion, an inimitable intervention in the everyday. Yet all creative works have a source, they all start from somewhere. Not necessarily a singular point but, like voices emerging from the static on a radio, they have a background. Arguably, the stronger the vision of the work, the clearer those voices and the more diminished the static. The plays presented here are very much works-in-progress, each with a voice that needs sharpening. The third in the anthology - *Paradaida* (translation: Paradise or ‘Walled-Garden’) - is overpopulated with a tumult of cultural investigations and still wrangling for balance between the geopolitical and the domestic. The second - *Off-White* - is in the process of finding its form, as it dances between lyrical, reported and naturalistic dialogue. The first – *Ostan* (translation: State or Province) – has both of these issues. All of the following plays, to varying degrees, still retain a lot of static.

In the contextual introductions that precede each of the stage plays, I hope to at least go some way in translating that static. Analogous to the anthropological reasons that scientists interpret cosmic microwave background radiation, my intention is to render some of this static, connecting the microcosms painted in each of these domestic dramas with the larger worlds in which they exist, and the universe of conceptual thinking that underlies the critical work. I aim to strengthen these links by addressing four key areas that relate to both the creative and critical work: Origins of the Concept, Social/Political/Historical Background, Critical Connections, The Evolving Work. In this way, I hope to bridge the personal and the political, and intersect the critical with the creative.

Ostan (State/Province)

Origins of the Concept

The idea for *Ostan* came from one of several sources, though initially from an article written in a regional newspaper that I came across in 2016. The report detailed how an Iraqi immigrant and businessman approached clients of the carwash that he owned in Shipley, and offered them cash to smuggle immigrants across from the European mainland in the boots of their vehicles. This instantly raised a number of complex questions: could this be an example of immigrants helping other immigrants, or was it simply an individual taking advantage of a form of neoliberal entrepreneurialism for their own gains? With so much focus in the media on the ruthlessness of human traffickers, was our attention being drawn away from a stalled and broken immigration system in the UK? And for those that have arrived safely on these shores through such means, how long does it take to be legally recognised in this country (with all the afforded rights that go with it; work, education, healthcare etc.) and what do people do in the meantime to get by? Yet these people did not only exist in the form of faceless headlines, as anyone that has had their car washed in such places must acknowledge. These are communities we engage with directly, our lives are intertwined, and paying for an innocent ‘Wash and Wax’ could make us complicit in something far more nefarious. At around the same time as reading about the Shipley business, our family frequented a hand carwash in Wolverhampton, situated in a small area of wasteland in the middle of an industrial estate, and run by a group of Kurdish men. One day, I observed my dad speaking to the senior worker, a man called Saman, while the younger employees cleaned the car. I was in the car with the windows up (obviously) and could not hear what they were saying, but there was something about the interaction between them that caught my attention.³⁷⁴ My father has always been somewhat ostentatious, though with a good dose of charisma, so he often holds court effortlessly. However, and although there is a universally acknowledged hierarchy between customer and the employee, there was something in

³⁷⁴ Unfortunately, I do not speak Farsi, so would not have been able to understand them regardless of the windows being up. However, what is I find pertinent in this context is that the Kurdish people have their own languages but, not being nearly as well established or universally received, they will often have to resort to speaking the languages of the dominant cultures from that region of the Middle East; Arabic, Turkish and Farsi.

Saman's body language (crossed arms, wry smile, the occasional mollifying nod) that suggested to me a certain 'defiance'. I began to question whether this dissent was cultural in origin.

Social/Political/Historical Background

Ostan is an ancient Persian word meaning "province" or "state", which is often observed in the suffix of many country names and regions found in the Middle Eastern; Kurdistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan etc. However, in this 'family' of nations, it is only Kurdistan that is without national sovereignty, and this is not for the want of trying by the Kurdish people, who have battled over the centuries for their autonomy. Historical interference, control and domination by the vast empires that once surrounded the Kurdish region, empires which became countries (Persia/Iran, Arab/Iraq, Ottoman/Turkey) that perpetuated this subjugation throughout the 20th century, coupled with the fact that the Kurdish "lacked both a civic culture and an established literature" means the Kurdish continue to struggle to establish their identity in the region (and beyond) well into the 21st century.³⁷⁵ While the mythology that surrounds their origins often acts to diminish, rather than embolden, Kurdish self-determination. In the thousand-year-old Persian epic, *Shahnameh* (translation: The Book of Kings), the Kurds are depicted as descended from fugitives that have been freed from the tyrannical embrace of the demon-Arab king, Zahhak. Their saviours? Two Persian noblemen. Right up to the present, Iranians evoke this hierarchy by devaluing one of the most fundamental features of any culture, language, as they "belittle Kurdish as merely a 'dialect' of Persian."³⁷⁶ Yet, by all accounts, Iran's detrimental impact pales in significance when compared to the historical injustices imposed by the Turkish and, more recently, Iraqi authorities.³⁷⁷ I was beginning to understand the 'defiance' that I perceived in Saman as being much more complex than having to deal with one haughty Iranian, on a

³⁷⁵ D. MacDowell, *The Modern History of the Kurds* (I.B. Tauris, 2004) p.2

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3

³⁷⁷ Movements and political parties such as the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) primarily contest Iraqi despotism. The more militant PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan or Kurdish Workers Party) employ guerrilla warfare and formed in direct response to Turkish tyranny, and are recognised as a terrorist organisation by the Turkish authorities. Although, as discussed, Iran has been guilty of subjugating the Kurds, no similar Kurdish movement or party has been created in response to Iranian transgression.

dull Wednesday afternoon, in an outdoor carwash in the West Midlands.³⁷⁸ Instead, Saman's department could now be seen as the articulation of a whole history of antagonisms, coming from several dominant cultures that surround the Kurdistan region. Furthermore, external pressures from imperious forces, as they pull people's allegiances one way and another, inevitably led to internal cracks and divisions between individuals and communities of a particular culture.³⁷⁹ It was this type of 'tribalisation' - whereby internal difference is dictated by the surrounding countries, and outward allegiances are denoted through hyphenation (Iraqi-Kurd, Iranian-Kurd, Turkish-Kurd) – that I felt the heart of the story of *Ostan* lay. Specifically, how it translated to recently arrived, first-generation Kurdish immigrants living and working in neoliberal England.

Critical Connections

In the second chapter of the critical work, I focused on the lives of the West Indian community working in London at the turn of the millennium. I argue that *Elmina's Kitchen* portrays the fractures and conflicts *within* a racial group as a consequence of the central tenant of competition that lies at the heart of neoliberal ideology.³⁸⁰ In *Ostan* - set in a rundown, outdoor carwash that acts as a cover for a human trafficking enterprise - the power dynamics are slightly different, though similar mechanisms are at work. Shapur is the Iranian immigrant owner who, like Deli in *Elmina's Kitchen*, has had time to establish himself as an entrepreneur in England and now embraces his identity as a neo-subject. However, Shapur is an example of an ambitious and affluent Asian upper-middle class, owning several local businesses (the carwash being just one) compared to Deli's "one-notch-above-tacky" takeaway.³⁸¹ Also, Shapur appears to want to help those who share his ethnic heritage, unlike Deli,

³⁷⁸ Along with the initial newspaper article, this real-world tableau inspired the creation of the characters of Shapur and Destan in *Ostan*, as well as influencing the undercurrents in their relationship.

³⁷⁹ Similar mechanisms were at play during the Iranian revolution in 1979, which resulted in the radical alteration of my own destiny.

³⁸⁰ In this chapter, I reference my own play (*Local*, 2000), which also observes the antagonisms between Iranian nationals; antagonisms rooted in the differing ideologies of separate factions, who failed to find common ground and secure power in the Iranian revolution, which manifest in the present as economic competition between two Iranian rival newsagents.

³⁸¹ Unlike Sivanandan's analysis of the parallels between hierarchies embedded in both caste and class that helped the Asian community prosper in the early neoliberal society in England, Shapur's unwavering ambition is rooted in his associations with the splendour of Persian culture, which is concomitant with notions of empire shared by the British.

who is at odds with all of his Black customers. Shapur gives jobs to newly arrived immigrants from the Middle East (Afghans, Kurds) and even claims the human trafficking enterprise that he proposes is to help those who are escaping persecution. When senior worker, Destan, reveals that he doesn't trust the character of Noah (truck driver and, in Shapur's eyes, potential transport for trafficking) because he is Black, Shapur boldly claims that in neoliberal society "there is no colour, only capital", which resonates with Nasser's declaration that there "is no race question in the new enterprise culture" in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. However, when it comes to who his daughter associates with (specifically, romantically) Shapur makes it clear to her that Noah is definitely out of the question, as are the Kurdish lads that work at the carwash. For Shapur, business might be colourblind, but when it comes to family and maintaining heritage, the racial and ethnic 'purity' of being Iranian is exclusive. On the other end of the neoliberal spectrum, the Kurdish workers have their own 'hyphenated' hang-ups. New arrival, Gorkem, is a young Turkish-Kurd who claims to Abdallah Ocalan's grandson and fiercely protective of his ethnic heritage.³⁸² Destan has Iranian-Kurdish roots, which Shapur capitalises on to coerce him into the business of trafficking people. While Rebin (our protagonist) is a middle-class Iraqi-Kurdish with connections to Saddam's regime, which Gorkem scorns, labelling him a traitor and calling him a "Hussein". Gorkem also shows disdain for Shapur, describing him as a "Persian fat cat". As with the characters in *Elmina's Kitchen*, in the pressure cooker of neoliberal society, these men 'label' each other as ethnically different, despite being from similar ethnic heritage. Rebin wants to escape his past, escape the hyphen, become an English citizen - but after ten years in stalled immigration system and still no 'indefinite leave to remain', and as the business of the carwash becomes a cover for a much darker venture, his future in this world becomes uncertain.

The Evolving Work

Every character in the play exhibits their racial/ethnic complexes in some way; Dawn is a White customer who is casually racist despite being married to an Indian, Noah reveals his envy for the

³⁸² Ocalan, or 'Apo' to his followers (known as 'Apoculars') was the leader of the PKK and a Kurdish freedom fighter, primarily concerned with vanquishing Turkish oppression. For some, he is a great liberator - for others, a murderous terrorist. To Gorkem, he is the hero of the Kurdish people.

Asian prosperity that he has been witness to in England, and while Shirin (Shapur's daughter) claims a humanitarian interest in the Kurdish immigrants, she fails/refuses to see her father's complicity in their suffering. As with all of the plays, the issues focus on the representation of racialised identities in the English workplace, but themes and issues should really sit in the background in creative work. In *Ostan*, racial allegiances are often aired by the characters within their first few lines, which can bring backstory to the front and leave little room for intrigue and revelation. Allowing the details of the working car wash (which sprays to use for which job, making sure the liquids are topped up, hoses that need parts replacing etc.) to lead the characters initially would give room for them to develop in the present, affording greater impact when they do reveal their past. Some of the characters need to be further developed. At the moment, Dawn feels like a stereotype, which can be dangerous. As the only working-class, White woman (in fact, the only White person) represented on stage and by making glib remarks about skin colour, could suggest that this racism is the norm for the White working-classes. More importantly, it detracts from the continuing threat of systemic racism embedded in neoliberal society, which is dictated by those in and with power. A possible way of flipping this on its head is to make Dawn an Indian woman. This would complicate her casual, racialised comments, as she could now be *reclaiming* those vicious and racist names she's been called in the past, by talking about it in more relaxed terms in the present. Noah also raises questions of negative representation, the only Black character on the stage and racist towards Middle Easterners (though the feeling is mutual with some of the Middle Eastern characters). These concerns about issues of race and racialisation run throughout the play, but feel like they could be minor fixes. The problem of the protagonist's journey is more pressing. When I set out to write *Ostan*, I did not really have a protagonist. Through the writing process, and somewhat reluctantly, Rebin emerged as a possible lead. Still, the detailing of the characters backstory tends to supersede the urgency of the present action. Behind the layers of history and politics in this draft of *Ostan* I believe there is a simpler story, about a young man, failed by a broken immigration system and a corrupt boss, who attempts to break the cycle by taking matters into his own hands.

Ostan
(State/Province)

by Arzhang Luke Pezhman

Characters

Gorkem	Kurdish, teens, male
Rebin	Kurdish, late twenties, male
Noah	Black British, late thirties, male
Dawn	White English, late forties, female
Destan	Kurdish, late forties, male
Shapur	Iranian, early sixties, male
Shirin	Iranian, early twenties, female

Place

An outdoor hand carwash; a tiny battered shack, shallow puddles in worn and pitted holes in the concrete floor. The forecourt stretches offstage, where the industrial sized jet washers are stored; this is where the car washing takes place. On stage; shelves of spray bottles containing different coloured liquids, an old stereo, a cracked, faux-leather sofa, a couple of dirty plastic garden chairs, buckets with large plastic squeegee-combs for drying, cutaway plastic galloon bottles containing wheel blackener and a paint brush, two large barrels, blue and black, one for wheels, one for body, pressure sprayers containing TFR mix for prewash or HCl mix for ground in motorway dirt on wheels, a battered Hoover. A large board with prices; from a five-pound wash and wax to a fifty-pound full valet. Half a dozen old air-fresheners, different colours, hang from the edge of the shack.

Notes

Dialogue in brackets are either, (Arabic) A, (Farsi) F. or (Kurmanji) K. Underlined words should be spoken in English, interspersed with whichever of the other languages that is being spoken, while words such as Agha (Sir), Khanom (Miss), Aziz (Dear), Boba/Bobs (Father), Pesar (Son) are sometimes interspersed with English.

/ denotes an interruption in speech

Gorkem enters, looks around, sits on the faux-leather sofa, sticks his hand down the back behind the cushions, rummages around, produces some coins, counts them, pockets them and leaves

A light goes on in the shack, Rebin comes out. He goes to the stereo and puts on some Arabic hip hop, he turns on the hoses, fills the barrels, tops up the wheel blackener, plugs in the jet washers and checks the spray, empties the hoover bag and plugs in the hoover. There is a 'snap' as the electricity shorts. The music falls silent. He goes to the fuse box, located in the shack, and flips the switch. The music starts up again. He adds a generous gulp of shampoo to each barrel. He grabs two hand sprays, hanging them by the trigger from his trouser pockets. He draws and shoots at the old air fresheners hanging from the shack, picking them off one by one

Rebin Simco, Ferhad, Ziryan, Elend, Hemin, Yado

He repeats this. Gorkem enters

Rebin Good morning, sir. Your options. From 5, the Full Valet, right down to 1, simple wash and wax. Whichever option you choose, we always offer a 5-star service.

Gorkem (*pulling the coins from his pocket*) Is this enough?

Rebin (*turns off the music*) You must be the fresh fish. Destan said you'd be starting today.

Gorkem Where is Shapur?

Rebin (Do you speak much English?) A

Gorkem Hey man, no Arabic. English only. Is Shapur here?

Rebin (Shapur doesn't run this place.) A

Gorkem No Arabic!

Rebin (Why? You clearly understand what I'm/) A

Gorkem spits on the floor. Rebin jet washes it away

Rebin Body fluids need to stay *inside* the body in public. Manners fresh fish, they're very polite in this country. If you don't say please or thank you, they'll throw you back.

Gorkem I need to practise English.

Rebin Then go Paget Road mate. Night classes every Tuesday and Thursday, 6 til 9.

Noah *enters*

Rebin S'up fam?

Noah What's up? Price of bloody petrol, that's what. Just had to pay through my teeth to fill the tank. Can you ask your mates to stop holding us to ransom?

Rebin My mates?

Noah You know, the Sheikhs and that. The Arabs.

Gorkem He is not Arab.

Noah Who's this?

Rebin Freshie. Just started today.

Noah Another one?

Gorkem I am not Arab!

Rebin Oi! (*to Noah*) Usual?

Noah Yeah, make it quick. Shift started ten minutes ago.

Rebin *takes the TFR mix and a cloth and exits*

Noah Where you come from?

Gorkem I come from the bus.

Noah Long journey?

Gorkem Twenty minutes, they give me a card.

Gorkem *holds out his travel card, Noah pays little attention*

Gorkem You like hip-hop?

Noah Serious?

Gorkem I love the British hip-hop.

Noah More of an R'n'B fan.

Rebin *enters*

Rebin That's a fiver then bruv.

Noah Mate. Skint. Can I have it on tick?

Rebin Cos it's you.

Noah Sweet.

Rebin We still haven't maxed out our stats on CoD but if you're online later we could hammer out Extinction on hardcore level and progress to extreme.

Noah I'm gonna be up at Fort William, via Liverpool and Newcastle.

Rebin Later then.

Noah *leaves*

Gorkem Teach me to wash the car.

Rebin Pardon?

Gorkem Teach me to wash the car. Please.

Rebin Better. You've got to take your jacket off, not wearing the right get up.

Rebin *goes to undo the zip on Gorkem's hoodie*

Gorkem Don't touch me man.

Rebin Alright, I was just/

Gorkem Don't ever touch me man.

Rebin Safe...what's your name?

Gorkem Gorkem. (*proud*) Gorkem Ocalan.

Rebin Well Gorkem Ocalan, I'm Rebin. You can't have a zip on the front of your clothes, or you'll scratch the car when you're washing it. Here (*he grabs a spare jumper*) put this on.

Gorkem *puts the jumper on over the hoodie*

Rebin Good, now I can show you the ropes.

Gorkem Ropes?

Rebin Ropes and soaps, soap on a rope, blue barrel's for body, black for wheels. Give it a blast to get the suds up and you're ready to go.

Gorkem Suds?

Rebin (Foam) K

Gorkem English.

Rebin What, you don't speak Kurdish either?

Gorkem Of course, but English only.

Rebin (I'll give you fucking English!) K We ge' all manner of whips roll through 'ere, yeah? Low Riders on 20-inch rims, Pimp Blasters wi' raa fins, Tow Truckers got bare pullin' power, pull y'out from y'roots bra. Beamers wi' bonnets tha' could bus' you up, Demon Dodges an' Monster Trucks, all in transit. But mostly banged up pieces of shit. Y'feel me?

Gorkem (*smiles*) Safe.

Rebin Safe?

Gorkem Safe.

Rebin So you got all that?

Gorkem Safe.

Rebin Safe.

Gorkem takes out a notebook. Rebin points out the different coloured sprays, speaking rapidly

Rebin Green for carpets. Dark purple for fabric seats. White cream, window cleaner. Pink, polish. Creamy yellow, after polish. Pinkish red, dashboard. Yellow, shines plastic. Creamy blue, gleam 101 for leather. Use the blue for black leather but you need gleam 101 for any other shade. Creamy purple liquid removes tar, glue and sap. Blue, gets off motorway dirt and insects from windscreens and reg. plates. Orange, air freshener.

Gorkem finishes scribbling and then points to the appropriate spray while recalling

Gorkem Carpet. Seats. Window. Polish. After polish. Dash-bore?

Rebin Dashboard.

Gorkem Plastic. Leather. Removes ... ?

Rebin Tar, glue and sap.

Gorkem (*continues*) Insect from windscreen. Air fresh-e-ner.

Rebin Well done fresh fish.

Gorkem Why do you call me this?

Rebin Cos you've still got salt behind your ears. (*Gorkem checks self-consciously*) You guys always take the bait.

Rebin smirks at Gorkem and goes into the shack. His silhouette can be seen through frosted glass, he speaks on the phone throughout the following. The sound of a car pulling up. Dawn enters holding out her keys. Gorkem tenses

Dawn Oh, another one. Well I usually have the 20 quid mini valet and polish, chariot's monthly makeover, but Dessy does it for a tenner and gives the headrests a quick once over as a favour. Too many hair products in my family.

Gorkem Wash and wax?

Dawn And gel, and cream, and spray. Just short of them setting it in concrete. Option 3 love. If you could make it quick, I've been running around like a blue-arse since six.

Gorkem Blue-arse?

Dawn Oh, you must be another Iraqi?

Gorkem I am not Iraqi!

Dawn Erm, is Destan around at all?

Gorkem (*chanting*) Low riders. Tow Truckers

Dawn It's just I've to get /

Gorkem Demon Dodges. Monster Truckers.

Dawn We could always forget the headrests.

Gorkem Piece of shit. Piece of shit. Banged up piece of shit!

Dawn Per'aps I should pop back.

Dawn leaves. Rebin comes from the shack, opens a new sheet of air fresheners and hangs them up

Rebin Complimentary air fresheners. Free one with every wash. And enough of the big "I am not". You're British now, so try be more British.

Gorkem But I'm Kurdish, like you.

Rebin Nah mate, I'm from Iraq.

Gorkem But your name is Kurdish.

Rebin And your name is Turkish.

Gorkem Gorkem is a Kurdish name, like Rebin.

Rebin But your family name, Ocalan, that's Turkish, right?

Gorkem My family are Kurdish. I am not Turkish.

Rebin Ok, but your ancestors must have been /

Gorkem I am not Turkish!

Gorkem makes a sound as if preparing to spit. Rebin grabs the jet spray. They stand off

Destan bounces on, walking backwards as he guides a car onto the forecourt

Destan (to Rebin) Are you trying to lose the business?

Rebin What?

Destan I saw her by the traffic lights but no shine on the car. (*holds his hand up for the car to stop*) There is just fine Dawn! (to Gorkem) Gorkem?

Gorkem Where is Shapur?

Destan Shapur doesn't run this place, I do. (What were you thinking saying 'piece of shit' to a customer?) K

Gorkem (It's him that tells me banged up pieces of shit. It's him.) K

Rebin (*clears throat*) English.

Gorkem (Shut up you piece of shit.) K

Destan You don't say 'piece of shit' if you don't understand the customers. (You say 'Pardon?'. Got it? 'Pardon'.) K

Gorkem Pardon.

Destan Pardon.

Dawn enters

Gorkem Pardon. Sorry. Don't throw me back.

Dawn Throw you back? Oh don't you worry my love. I'm not one of *them*. I got two about the same age as you. One's darker than you. One's lighter than me. Well. Kind of greyer. But my husband, he's a real darkie. Like, the skin tone, you know. Darker than you lot anyway. And when he goes in the sun, he turns *black*. Well not black, obviously, because of the features, but darker than a darkie.

Rebin How you doing Mrs. Patel?

Dawn Fine thanks Reb, still here?

Rebin Always here, Mrs. P. How's the boys?

Dawn The way Dom mopes around the house you'd think he's got his period, and Darrell stays in his room all day, wanking no doubt. Or is it the other way around? *(to Gorkem)* Twins. Not identical. More like a tag team. One mopes while the other locks himself away, then they swap. Kinda feel sorry, must be difficult having intimate moments to yourself. I say moments, takes up half the day, the other half spent moping. Moping, wanking, wanking, moping.

Gorkem What is wanking-moping?

Rebin *(gestures)* Şikandin.

Destan *(embarrassed)* Rebin, usual for Dawn please. Cars are going to start lining up soon. 5-star service you see.

Destan puts on his gloves. Rebin gets the TFR spray and they exit. The sound of the jet hose in the background means Dawn has to repeat herself/speak louder

Dawn Destan told me you're Kurdish.

Gorkem Yes.

Destan enters, blasts the black barrel, takes out a soapy cloth and exits

Dawn I'm sorry I called you Iraqi.

Gorkem It's Ok.

Rebin enters, blasts the blue barrel, takes out a soapy cloth and exits

Dawn But Iraqi's aren't all bad are they? I mean, Rebin's Iraqi.

Gorkem His accent is Kirkuk. South is Iraq. North is Kurdistan. Kirkuk in the middle, in Kurdistan.

Destan and Rebin enter and put back their cloths. Destan's mobile goes off, a call-to-prayer

Destan If you'll excuse me Dawn, the children use all my time in the morning, so I miss fajr (*he gestures to his phone*) Rebin will sort out the headrests.

Destan disappears into the shack. We see his silhouette through the frosted glass as he prays

Rebin (*to Gorkem*) You got this.

Gorkem, unsure, grabs one of the sprays and a cloth and exits

Dawn He's a bit young.

Rebin They're all young. They come young, they leave young, only me that doesn't go anywhere.

Dawn You've got work, that's something.

Rebin Get frostbite in the winter, trench foot in the summer, yeah I guess that's something.

Dawn Oi, at least you've got a job.

Rebin Shapur reckons if I work here long enough, he'll buy me my own car.

Dawn Man thinks he's Henry Ford.

Rebin There's this girl on the ring road by the lights, washes your windscreen when the traffic stops. I think she's Romanian. When I get a set of wheels, I'll get my windscreen cleaned, make her laugh, hold up the traffic, cars beeping their horns, so I'll drive all the way around the city back to the same lights and ask her to clean my windscreen again.

Dawn Is that all you boys think about?

Rebin I'm almost thirty and I'm sick of wanking.

Dawn laughs. Rebin does not.

Destan comes from the shack, spots Gorkem

Destan (*perplexed*) What is Gorkem doing?

Rebin He's got this.

Dawn (*looking towards her car*) Have my headrests turned purple?

Destan *dashes off*

Dawn He's not going hit him, is he?

Rebin Needs a good slap.

Destan *and Gorkem enter*

Destan No, purple is for carpets.

Gorkem (No sir, purple is for the seats!) K

Destan I'm so sorry about this Dawn.

Dawn Don't worry, piece of shit could do with some colour.

Gorkem Piece of shit!

Destan Gorkem!

Dawn (*to Destan*) Listen, we'll sort it out later. Just don't be too hard on the boy.

Dawn *exits*. Gorkem *takes out the notebook and reads*

Gorkem (Green is for the carpets. Dark purple is for the seats.) K

Destan (*to Rebin*) What in the hell is the boy talking about?

Rebin *shrugs*. Gorkem *gives Destan the notebook then runs over to the bottles*

Gorkem Green, carpets. Dark purple, seats. White cream, windows.

Destan (*to Rebin*) What did you tell him?

Rebin I told him straight.

Gorkem (This clown has been lying to me!) K

Rebin Not my fault you can't understand English.

Gorkem *goes for him*. Destan *intervenes*

Rebin Come on then (you little runt!) K

Gorkem (Go fuck your mum.) K

Rebin Hear that? He's bringing my mom into it.

Gorkem (I'll bring your mom into it. And your grandmom. And your great grandmom. And all the other pieces-of-shit in your family.) K

Destan (*throughout*) Gorkem ... Gorkem ... Gorkem!

Gorkem *takes out a knife*

Rebin Is this boy serious?

Destan *quickly intervenes, bunching his hand around Gorkem's fist and squeezing. Gorkem winces and gives up the knife*

Destan You do not come to work with a knife. If you do, then you do not come to work. Ever. Go back to your accommodation, come back tomorrow.

Gorkem (Sir, he told me the wrong/) K

Destan Go home!

Gorkem *exits*

Rebin They'll let anyone in these days.

Destan You think this is a joke? People walk by and watch us fight with knives?

Rebin Half the people around here want us to kill each other anyway.

Destan Forget them. Did you get any news? Did you send the letter?

Rebin *shrugs*

Destan You send them again? Every three months, remember. And you change it "As you can see from your system, I applied for status on tac, tac, tac. I have waited 1, 2, 3 /

Rebin 7, 8, 9 years.

Rebin *picks up the sprays and shoots at the old air fresheners one-by-one as he goes through the names*

Rebin Simco, he got his last year. Then Ferhad, got his own apartment, I'm still in the same shithole room. Hemin's just started college in London, and Yado's Canadian now, while I'm still no-one. I'll be hanging one up for 'piece-of-shit' soon.

Destan Watch your language.

Rebin I've been doing nothing but watching my language. Passing their tests, Level 3, level 4, for what? Option 1, Option 5, wash and wax, clean your wheels!

Rebin chucks down his hand sprays and leaves. Destan considers going after him but can't leave the carwash unattended. He busies himself

Shapur enters, well dressed. He reads a newspaper

Shapur I have been in this country for over thirty years and never read a good news story about Iran. (These English people are ignorant.) F They think they know about us, but it's us that know them.

Destan Shapur agha, you know I don't like to talk about politics.

Shapur Business then. Still offering the 5-star service?

Destan Every option 5-star!

Shapur (Well? Let me see the books.) F.

Destan goes into the shack and gets the logbook, giving it to Shapur, who starts to peel through the pages

Destan Yesterday, I think Rebin forgot to write up two Full Hand Polish and one Full Interior Valet.

Shapur That boy needs to get his thumb out of his arse. (*log book*) What about Monday?

Destan (Monday was quite a slow day. Rain.) F

Shapur (Rain? Destan, this is not bloody cricket where rain stops play!) F It's a bloody carwash. In England. (*log book*) This doesn't add up. Are you under charging customers?

Destan I charge them what's on the board.

Shapur Don't do them any favours, Destan. (*closes logbook*) Business is slow. Too slow. Your Kurdish brothers by the ring road have already made me twice as much this week. The Afghans on Upper Villiers Street made over one and a half thousand for me last week ... The Albanians on the Lea Road have queues that are never less than six-seven cars long, blocking traffic. They *must* be making two, even three thousand a week. Bloody Albanians. *Six or seven* cars long.

Destan You said we would get the new board, the new sign /

Shapur You're blaming this on a sign?

Destan Well what about the floor? You said we would get this fixed.

Shapur (*dips his toe*) I like the holes. I can tell how business is by the state of the holes. If they are full, then business is good. If not, well.

Destan Shapur agha, it is the summer, the sun dries /

Shapur (Destan jaan, first it is the rain, now it is the the sun.) F. Excuses. No, if the water flows, the puddles show. And if the puddles show, the money flows. These puddles are shallow. So?

Destan The money does not flow.

Shapur How are the family?

Destan Yelda? I think the sickness in her heart has reached her head ... but Hozan! He started to kick the football around. Maybe he will play for England one day.

Shapur And the little one?

Destan Azade. The dew of the heavens still rests on her cheeks as if she descended this very morning. My angel.

Shapur Yes, well, be careful she doesn't break her wings when she falls (*the logbook*) This place is like a sick horse Destan.

Destan I can work more.

Shapur There is a McDonalds at the top of the road, they are always looking for more people. Unless you can think of a way for this place to increase turnover /

Destan 24-hour!

Shapur A 24-hour carwash?

Destan Sure, people work all the hours, they need their car washed all the hours. (I can work more.) F

Shapur And how will you see the cars to wash them?

Destan Floodlights.

Shapur It's not bloody cricket, Destan! Floodlights?! More overheads. No. When a horse is sick, you have to put it down.

Destan *is defeated*. Shapur gives him the logbook

Shapur When I first came here I had five thousand pounds sown into my jacket. I would have had ten times more but I was not prepared to do their military service. I had to buy my way out. I do not hate them for that. I'm grateful they gave me safe passage. When you came here who gave you the opportunity to work?

Destan You did, agha.

Shapur And who made sure you had work all this time?

Destan You have, agha.

Shapur And how many people do you think I've helped like this?

Destan Many, I'm sure.

Shapur (*paper*) Four more drowned in the sea. A whole family this time. This is not the better life they were hoping for. Do you know how much they pay for this so-called privilege?

Destan We sold everything, borrowed everything we could and it was still not enough. We sold cigarettes at the borders so we could pay to continue our journey, sometimes on foot through the mud and rain, sometimes in the back of a truck. But it was the channel crossing that was the worst. We tried by train a couple of times but always turned back. We had no choice but to go by boat, not a boat, so many people you couldn't see the boat. In the middle of the night you can't see anything. I just held onto Yelda and prayed. The man next to me, young like Rebin, was praying as well. He stopped halfway across, or I stopped hearing him. I didn't see him get off at the other side.

Shapur There has to be a better way, this is all I'm suggesting, Destan. That we help people find a way. These boats are no good, but if we could help people cross safely. Maybe in the back of a car, maybe hidden in the boot. They cross over on the ferry, pick them up, bring them back. One thing we have a lot of here are cars and drivers, and I'm sure some of them would jump at the chance of making a bit of money.

Destan Too risky.

Shapur It's win-win. They make a bit of money, the carwash stays open, we make a bit of money, our people get safe passage. Better than hanging off the side of a bloody rubber dinghy. Or someone else taking a cut while I put these buggers to work.

Destan While *you* put them to work?

Shapur Or not. They'll just be grateful they got here safely. *That* is 5-star service, Destan.

Destan And if they get caught? These drivers?

Shapur Then there is no link to us. (No questions asked.) F. No questions asked.

Destan (No questions asked) F ... but I have questions.

Shapur £500. I give you £500 for every person. Tax free.

Destan This is too risky for me, Shapur agha.

Shapur Rebin could help.

Destan No! Rebin has nothing. No rights. No protection. No home.

Shapur And how long is it since you have been home?

Destan Fifteen years. When I was applying for status, if you go back to your homeland they don't let you return (even for your own mother's funeral). Now Hosan, the uniform, the football boots, they must be like the other children but it's expensive. Of course, I dream of taking him back one day to meet his grandfather, but he's getting old and I don't know how long he'll /

Shapur None of us are getting any younger Destan. So, you can keep dreaming while you're serving Big Macs, or you can be reunited with your family before it's too late.

Destan What if...what if we can bring more business in? More carwash business. What if we can balance the books? Will you consider using one of your other businesses for this? Please, Shapur, just this one chance.

Shapur Ok, but until then, we try it this way. Deal?

He gives Destan the newspaper

Shapur I love this country, Destan. You know I used that five thousand pounds to open a newsagent. Now I have three carwash, two off-licence and four newsagent, and my daughter is at university. You see, we can make good news here.

He exits. Destan slumps onto the sofa, he puts his hand down behind the cushions, looking for coins, but finds nothing. Music

2

Shirin and Rebin. Shirin wears a goth/punk fusion, dark ripped clothes, chains, piercings, hair sticking up. She is on the phone

Shirin Yes, hello ... it's Shirin ... Shirin ... no, not Sharon, *Shirin ... Shirin.*

Rebin (Try the phonetic alphabet.) F

Shirin S for Sierra Yes, S. H for /

Rebin Hostel? Hostile?

Shirin (*into phone*) Hotel. I for India.

Rebin Not Iran? How rude.

Shirin R for /

Rebin Rebin.

Shirin Romeo.

Rebin My Juliet!

Shirin Then another India. Yep. Then N for November... Yes, Shirin ... Surname? (*sighs*) Golpayegani.

Destan enters followed by Gorkem. They hold the TFR hand pump sprays

Gorkem (His face doesn't look happy.) K

Destan His face always looks like that. (Don't panic so much.) K

Gorkem I don't panic so much.

Shirin Golpayegani.

Destan Just move backwards from the car a little bit.

Gorkem But I want to get the spray all everywhere.

Shirin Golpayegani.

Destan The hoses have the rubber tips on the end but we still don't want to hit the car.

Gorkem I don't hit the car!

Shirin Gol-pay-e-gani!

They look at her, she retreats, phone to one ear finger in the other

Destan Just calm down.

Gorkem I never washed a car this (*can't think of the word*) this much money.

Destan You see the price board? Do you see the higher price for the fancy cars? No, we treat everyone the same here, whether you've got the old banger or a (*he gestures off*)

Rebin Jaguar F-Type with a 5 litre V8 supercharged engine, does 0-60 in 3 and half seconds, top speed of 200 miles per hour.

Destan Whatever the car/

Rebin £110,000

Destan We offer the same service (*he glares at Rebin*) come on, forget it. Wash now.

Destan *blasts the barrels and he and Gorkem exit with soapy cloths*

Shirin (*phone*) Look is there someone else - I'm not usually like this - but is there someone else I can talk to? I'm sorry but this is taking - I'm meant to be signing up for your 'immediate action' protest - but this is taking forever ... of course I'm on the list ... Golpayegani ... Golpaye ... never mind, I'll call back later. (*she hangs up*) Racist.

Rebin Who was that?

Shirin Ecosoc.

Rebin Who's sock?

Shirin Short for Ecological Action society. Can I plug my phone in?

Rebin *gestures the socket. Shirin plugs her phone in and gets a shock*

Rebin That's dodgy plug soc. Short for "want to ask your dad to get it sorted"?

She takes a photo of the offending socket

Shirin I'm also part of the Feminist society and the Decolonisation society.

Rebin What is it you actually do at university?

Shirin Philosophy, but they champion 'debate' and 'free speech' in the same way the media pander to the far right, so I have to go further afield. Ecosoc can be a bit anti-immigration at best, outright fascists at worst. Feminist society are still hung up on populism

and neoliberalism so they can be a bit capitalist. And the decolonisation society recognises that racism and colonialism are deeply intertwined with contemporary environmental issues, patriarchy and neoliberal economics, so they don't really know what they are. Which I can sympathise with cos people have got my name wrong so many times I'm starting to wonder if I'm really me.

Rebin Missed opportunity. Think about all the bank accounts you could open, the credit cards you could get, completely (untraceable) F...invisible.

Shirin Yeah, why don't you try it?

Rebin No address, no credit card.

Shirin You have an address.

Rebin Anywhere between here and Kirkuk. When I was a kid, me and my neighbour would walk back from school, down our street, pointing to the houses saying, "they live in Australia now...and they've moved to Germany...and they've gone to America." Not down the road, or to a city in the North, or some lovely little village in the South. To another country. Then my neighbour was gone. He was not so lucky.

Shirin Was it the regime?

Rebin No, I think he ended up here.

Shirin (*laughs*) What about the new boy?

Rebin Gorkem?

Shirin Gorkem. He's a Kurd, right?

Rebin Nah, he's Turkish. Turkish Kurd.

Shirin And Destan?

Rebin Destan's an Iranian Kurd, that's why he sucks up to your dad so much.

Shirin While you're a...?

Rebin The original Iraqi Kurd mate.

Shirin Like peas in a pod.

Rebin More like points of a triangle.

Shirin Confusing.

Rebin Try living it.

Noah *enters. He's in his pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers. He stops at the edge of the puddles*

Rebin S'up fam?

Noah Stressed man.

Shirin So stress you forgot to dress.

Noah What? Nah, I'm just going to bed.

Rebin Where were you last night? (*taps his own ear*) No fun gaming with 8-year-old Americans.

Noah (*looks at watch*) Hanover, Bielefeld, Munster, then Rotterdam ... no, Rotterdam was this morning. Long haul from St. Petersburg.

Rebin If you want it washed you going to have to wait for the Prince of Persia. I'm at college today.

Noah Badges. Came for my badges. Been coming here for time now, and always give props to this place. Sneaks, Joey, Flik. Christ even Grogan comes and he hasn't even got a car, still gives you a couple of quid to blast down his mountain bike after he's been over the Recky. They all come here now instead of the Albanians down the road.

Rebin What you chatting?

Noah You always do a sweet job man, that's why I told them. All your little bottles and sprays, magic potions, wizardry, puts some other-wordly gleam on the paintwork, makes the inside smell like Willy Wonka's factory. Top drawer.

Rebin So what's the problem?

Noah You washed my badges off. Got home, looked at the back and boom, no engine size, no name, no nothing.

Shirin Isn't that what boy-racers do, take all the crap off the back?

Noah Except I'm a truck driver.

Shirin With a rudeboy car.

Noah Can you just (*to Rebin*) badges, please.

Rebin goes into the cloakroom. Noah takes off his slippers, negotiates his way through the puddles and goes to sit next to Shirin. He checks out her clothes

Noah I thought Indian girls were meant to cover themselves up?

Shirin I'm not from India.

Noah Where are you from then?

Shirin Where are you from?

Noah Bushbury.

Shirin No, what's your background.

Noah You mean, like, for my avatar?

Shirin I mean what's your history?

As Noah speaks Shirin records him

Noah I remember dad getting a ZX Spectrum. Rubber keys. Daley Thompson's Decathlon. Then came the Master System, Golden Axe, Alex Kidd. Never had a Mega Drive, but my mate Dan did. That's right, and he had the Commodore 64 while I had the ZX. He was always one step ahead. Never went down the Atari route and don't know anyone had an Amstrad. The SNES was next. Again, never had one but played multiplayer Mario Kart loads at college. Then everything changed with the PlayStation. Dan dropped off the radar. Spent nights awake scaring the shit out of myself with Resident Evil. Then, well it's been Xbox all the way. Online. FPS mania. Rebin as my wingman. Call of Duty, Titanfall. Now it's all Battle Royale. We spent last two weekends straight on Fortnite.

Shirin I meant more like where are your parents from.

Noah Oh, we lived on Aston Road until I was about ten then we moved to Swan Bank. Are you recording me?

Shirin It's for my blog, you don't mind do you?

Noah Could have asked.

Shirin What about your grandparents?

Noah What about your grandparents? Are they back in... wherever your dad's from? (*looking off*) Him and Destan arguing?

Shirin Nah, that's just how they talk.

Noah Intense. They look deep in council.

Shirin Deep in council? That's erudite, for a trucker.

Noah Eru-what? I nicked it from Lord of the Rings. Anyway, I'm not a trucker. I'm a gamer.

Shirin You can't just peel off the background, float away. History always catches up with you.

Noah I sit in a cab delivering machine parts for multinationals across Europe and spend the rest of my time online gawping at a monitor. I live life through a screen. What's the past got to do with me?

Rebin enters and gives Noah a clear plastic bag with car badges in it

Noah What's this?

Rebin Your badges.

Noah The name's broke.

Rebin You can put them back together easily, bit of glue, good as new.

Noah Might just leave it.

Shirin Boy-racer.

Noah Vampire.

Shirin Philistine.

Noah Culture Vulture.

He exits

Shapur and Destan enter

Destan Independence? Referendum? Referendum. In this country you have the referendum, 52% vote to leave, they leave. In Kurdistan 93% vote to leave, Iraq says vote is "unconstitutional". In this country, Scotland want to leave the U.K., they can leave. If Kurdistan wants to leave, they invade Kirkuk.

Shapur Iraq are still the Western puppet.

Destan Agha, with all the respect, Iran is backing them as well.

Shapur Well not this corner of Iran. You want to leave, leave.

Destan I'm not talking about here, of course agha I want to stay but /

Shapur I think you need to decide where you are Destan jaan.

Destan I have. I told you I didn't like talking about politics. It was you that brought up the Barzanis again, and how they have /

Shapur Shirin khanom, haven't you got a kiss for your old man?

Shirin *(on her phone)* Got shit all over my face dad, don't want to get it on your nice suit.

Shapur *(to Destan)* My angel. She might have a loose mouth, but her writing has got her to university where she...what is it you do there again, aziz-a-man?

Shirin Activism.

Gorkem *enters*

Shapur And how is the new boy doing?

Gorkem *(bows)* Thank you agha, for giving me the honour of washing your car.

Shapur Looks like you've done a 5-star job. And so gracious. You'll fit in nicely around here.

Gorkem *remains bowed. Rebin and Shirin snigger. Dawn enters*

Dawn Not interrupting am I?

Destan Dawn. Usual?

Shapur *(Rebin, are you going to do any work today?)* F

Rebin Oh no, I ain't at work today.

Shapur So what are you doing here?

Rebin College cancelled. Tutor sick.

Dawn Actually I'd like Gorkem to do it.

Rebin Really?

Gorkem Really?

Dawn You've come a long way from your first time. I trust you.

Gorkem *grabs TFR mix and exits*

Shapur It's good that you encourage the young ones Dawn.

Dawn How are my boys doing for you?

Shapur Best paper lads I've ever had.

Dawn
lad. Bet you say that to all the mums ... So how young is he? The new

Shapur He's old enough.

Dawn Cos I know my lads were thirteen when they started delivering for you, but in a place like this you have to be sixteen, right?

Shapur All that matters in this place is that you're 5-star. That's how we keep our loyal customers, Dawn.

Dawn Who should I give my money to?

Shapur *indicates Destan. She hands him a tenner*

Shapur (Doesn't she have option 3?) F

Destan (Yes.) F

Shapur (Then it's not enough.) F

Destan Sorry Dawn, it's twenty. Remember?

Dawn But the usual's a tenner.

Shapur (What did I say about charging these customers 'mates rates'?) F

Dawn You know, my mother-in-law talks to my husband in Urdu when she says something she don't want me to understand. It's very rude.

Destan I'm sorry Dawn but the price is twenty pounds.

Dawn Since when?

Shapur It's always been twenty pounds.

Dawn How long have I been coming here now?

Gorkem *returns the TFR mix and goes for the cloth*

Dawn You know what Gorkem love, don't bother.

Gorkem But I have done only half.

Dawn (*she gives Destan the tenner*) And that's what I'm paying. (*to Gorkem*) Here's a fiver. That's for *your* trouble, alright love?

She exits

Rebin Did we just lose a customer?

Shapur The business will survive without her.

Rebin I thought we couldn't afford to lose any more customers?

Shapur What we can't afford, Rebin, is to lower our standards. 5-star, remember? We have a name to uphold.

Shapur *gestures to Destan and they exit*

Rebin What is it with you lot and names?

Shirin What's your name?

Rebin Rebin.

Shirin Robin?

Rebin Piss off.

Shirin Like Batman and Robin?

Rebin Alright.

Shirin The Nazis assigned all Jewish women the name Sara. Slave-owners gave their African slaves their own Western surnames names like Johnson. You want to destroy someone, take away their identity first.

Gorkem Like in Kurdistan. In 1983 the Turkish do not let people speak Kurdish anymore, then no babies are allowed Kurdish names.

Shirin But you're Turkish?

Gorkem I am not Turkish!

Shirin (*to Rebin*) You told me he was Turkish.

Rebin Well he is good with knives.

Gorkem I have a Turkish last name.

Rebin He's got quite the heritage.

Gorkem You shut your mouth.

Rebin Gorkem here *claims* that his grandfather is /

Gorkem My grandfather *is* Abdullah Ocalan.

Shirin Abdullah Ocalan?

Rebin Founder and leader of the Kurdish workers party? Come on so-called activist. Kurdish freedom fighters? The PKK?

Shirin (*googles it*) PKK. (*her eyes widen, she goes to Gorkem*) Hi, I don't think I've properly introduced myself. I'm Shirin. And you're Gorkem, right?

Gorkem You look like a girl I know once.

Shirin A friend?

Gorkem I don't know. She was in a bomb. Exploded. Her face, white, and her hair (*he makes sticking up gestures mimicking Shirin's hairstyle*) I have to go eat.

Gorkem *goes*

Rebin When my neighbour moved out, I never told you who moved in next door. Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein himself.

Shirin Fuck off, Rebin.

She leaves. Destan enters

Rebin Can you believe Gorkem is going on about Apo Ocalan being his grandfather again? Boy's got problems.

Destan We have all got problems and talking about politics isn't going to fix it. More cars will.

Rebin I keep telling you £5 is too much for a basic. The Albanians are doing it for 4. They play Grime music and wear pork pie hats to look like Olly Murs. They make most off tips, so you'd make back the pound lost. And their floor isn't fucked up.

Destan Who in the hell is Olly Murs? And grime is what we wash off the windscreen. Did you order the extra TFR mix?

Rebin Did it this morning.

Destan And the Gleam 101?

Rebin Done.

Destan And the seals for the hoses?

Rebin Shit.

Destan Yes, shit indeed. We need to make sure the carwash is functioning. We need more cars, more customers. (Never mind Olly Murs or whatever they call this Grime music. None of this is relevant. What is relevant is that we bring in more business. And we can't bring in more business if the tools of the business are not working. Do you understand? Can you hear what I'm saying to you?) K

As Destan speaks Rebin retreats

*

Night

Rebin puts on a gaming headset and picks up a controller. Noah does the same. They are in their respective accommodations, gaming.

Rebin Feels like they're speaking a different language.

Noah Just can't stand it when they eat down the microphone.

Rebin I'm talking about Destan and Shapur.

Noah What do you expect? They're old school.

Shapur What do you expect from the younger generation?

Destan He should have a family by now. Or at least a girlfriend.

Shapur Well it's hard if he doesn't know if he's here or there or anywhere.

Noah The French are quite soft spoken, the Italians sound leery as fuck.

Destan I did it. Left Yalda on the Italian border. We met in France and here we are.

Rebin You should hear the Arabs.

Noah Is that all that ach-lach-nach-tach shit?

Rebin (*laughs*) Something like that.

Noah Wonder what English sounds like to them?

Rebin Fah-fa-fah-la-lah-la-lah-nah.

Noah (*laughs*) You in a lobby?

Rebin Warhawk.

Noah Drop me an invite then.

Shapur They'll be here soon.

Destan Yelda is starting to ask questions.

Shapur Did you tell her you had to stock check?

Destan In the middle of the night?

Shapur The only time I'm free, so, let's check the stock.

Noah Stockade! Get behind the stockade fuck's sake man.

Rebin This noob is all over me.

Noah Got him (*shoots*) Domed!

Rebin You on sniper?

Noah Standard.

Rebin I'm going akimbo, bit of run and gun.

Noah Getting my secondary out. LMG for a bit of spray and pray.

Shapur Sprays are looking low.

Destan They leak, need new nozzles.

Shapur Not a problem, after all this must remain a 'functioning' carwash.

Destan We always do a good job here.

Shapur This is why I trust you.

Destan (*gesture off*) And these people?

Shapur They have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Destan So where are they?

Rebin Where are you?

Noah Up in the tower. You?

Rebin Doing a Rambo.

Noah (*laughs*) Bunny hopping everywhere more like.

Rebin Better than camping.

Noah The fire's warm dude. Come toast some marshmallows.

Rebin Camper!

Destan A campervan?

Shapur We can fit more in.

Destan How many?

Shapur Just two this time. Better than one in the boot though.

Destan More chance of getting caught.

Shapur One phone call when they arrive in town and the money is all transferred online. Secure bank account. We've come a long way from sewing cash into jacket linings.

Destan And if they don't deliver.

Shapur They will deliver the package with care.

Noah Care package!

Rebin What you got?

Noah Ain't got nothing yet. Tangos everywhere. Cover my arse while I pick it up.

Rebin Wait a tick. Just teabagging this noob. Kiss my swingers!

Noah Never mind your stalling ... too late, care package intercepted.

Rebin Shit! Shit, shit, shit.

Noah Alright, don't rage quit.

Rebin I'm not gonna rage quit.

Noah Don't then.

Rebin I'm not.

Noah Don't.

Rebin Feel like rage quitting.

Noah Bye then.

Rebin Not the game. Business ain't good.

Noah I'd happily swap with you. Do me good to be up and about, instead of sitting on my arse dusk til dawn. But then I don't think Shapur would hire the likes of me.

Rebin What are you saying?

Destan What about Dawn?

Shapur We can't trust likes of her.

Shapur What about Noah?

Destan What are you saying?

Shapur He drives a truck for a living, what's he got to lose?

Destan Can we trust him though?

Rebin Get lost.

Noah Shit you not.

Noah The Jeffcocks, they've got the big-ass haulage company on the other side of town. Fleet's twice the size. The boss is a right shady fucker, member of some far-right group. And good old Shapur here happily does business with him.

Rebin So?

Noah So?!

Rebin I can't decide who he does business with.

Noah Don't reckon it's the only dodgy pie he's got his finger in.

Rebin What's it got to do with me?

Noah How do you think you got here?

Shapur At least we know he won't get lost.

Destan Not Sudanee. We can't trust.

Shapur Is he Sudanese?

Destan I don't know, but he's black.

Shapur Business is colour-blind Destan. I thought you would have been here long enough to understand that.

Destan But sometimes the black customers, they make a fuss. 'You haven't cleaned here, you haven't done this properly'. Sometimes they refuse to pay.

Shapur And Noah?

Destan He always pays.

Shapur So?

Rebin Grabbed a sniper rifle,
climbed the tower steps.

Noah Not *here*, here. This country,
here.

Rebin Been so long, can't even
remember.

Noah So you've been here a few
years /

Rebin Try 9 going on 10.

Shapur 9 maybe 10 of them would fit
in one of his trailers.

Destan Too risky.

Shapur We could make units. Fit
them to the inside of the roof.

Destan Seems like a lot of work.

Shapur That's 5 grand to you.

Rebin I'm not sure.

Destan I'm not sure.

Noah What's to be sure about? The
man's suspect.

Rebin Alright, easy blood. Man give
me a job.

Noah Man give you a job? Man
works with fascist mandem!

Rebin To be honest bro, they're just
some other shit I've got to
deal with. Like Brexit,
Coronavirus and Global
Warming. Low down on my
list though, y'feel me?

Noah No, *bro*. I don't feel you...I'm
out (*earphones off*)

Shapur You have to forget all this
black and white business.
This is the new world Destan,
there is no colour, only
capital.

Rebin Noah?...Fam?

*A vehicle pulls onto the forecourt.
Blinding headlights*

*

Gorkem and Shirin at the carwash. Gorkem works while Shirin helps fill in an equal opportunity form

Shirin Do you consider yourself disabled?

Gorkem Consider yourself? I don't understand. Prefer not to say.

Shirin Just a yes or no for this one.

Gorkem Prefer not to say. You said I could do it for all of them.

Shirin Yeah, sorry, they want a definite answer for this one.

Gorkem But it's not a definite question. Consider? This is what you think, not what you know, yes?

Shirin We'll come back to it. Ok, now for the fun part /

Gorkem None of this is fun /

Shirin Race/nationality/ethnic origin. White /

Gorkem Yes.

Shirin Ok. You can't just be white, there's categories of white. English. Scottish. Welsh. Northern Irish /

Gorkem (*reads*) Asian. Indian. Pakistani. Bangladeshi. British. Other Asian background /

Shirin Too many boxes.

Gorkem And not enough. Where is the Kurdish box? Where is the Middle Eastern box?

Shirin (*ticks*) Prefer not to say.

Gorkem No. I want to say who I am (*takes the pen and the sheet*). What's this 'other'? Other to what? I think I'm other. Yes, other

Gorkem corrects them all to 'Other'

Shirin I think you're gonna need a new form.

Gorkem Forms, forms, storms of forms. Rivers of choices, too many voices.

Shirin You can't rhyme all the time.

Gorkem Rhyme all the time?

Shirin It's annoying.

Gorkem That's why I want to go to classes but these stupid forms /

Shirin Even if you were brilliant it would be annoying.

Gorkem takes out a notepad, putting some performance into the next. As he gets into it Shirin starts to record him, audio at first

Gorkem Got shudders
like rudders in rough seas,
who sees what becomes of me?
No fate but what you make for me.
(Like that film with Sarah Connor and Arnie.) K
Born on blood-soaked soil,
sown in soil soaked in oil.
And when the oil's gone,
they'll find another reason for treason.
They'll blow their horn and kill the dawn,
while we're just buds on branches that blossom in the wrong season.
Born for scorn,
no way to live,
something's got to give.

Shirin Not bad.

Gorkem I have to look up some of the words on the internet.

Shirin Not exactly organic.

Gorkem You think this is hip-hop?

Shirin You're gonna have to hammer a bit more of a beat into it.

Gorkem drops a beat. Shirin switches to recording him on video

Gorkem (*spits*) Coming out the war zone I split the microphone,
My weapon is my phone that records this mad tone.
"Take your shoes off before you get into the boat,
Here's a bag for your phone so if you drop it, it floats.
Your jewellery is sharp, can bursts the sides you see,
So the best thing to do is just give it to me."

Gorkem clocks her filming him and puts his hand over the camera

Gorkem Can't find the right words.

Shirin Words aren't everything.

She takes his hand away from the camera, holding onto it. They break when Noah enters

Shirin Your playmate isn't here.

Noah Looks like yours is though. Or is this something more serious?

Shirin You wouldn't know serious if it came up and bit you on the Mega Drive.

Noah That's low. Told you I never had a Mega Drive.

Gorkem You want me to clean your wheels. I can do a proper job.

Noah You wanna have a crack at my whip?

Gorkem Crack the whip.

Noah You gonna make it look kriss?

Gorkem Crisp and clean.

Noah Kriss, not crisp. You're gonna have to work on your vocabulary.

Shirin He has been.

Gorkem *(notebook)* You wanna hear?

Noah Some other time. Destan about?

Gorkem Gone mosque. I can do as good job as him.

Noah Left a message at work for me to meet him here.

Shirin Rebin'll be heartbroken.

Noah Not by my hand.

Shirin *(mocking)* Then maybe with your crystal axe of Zarth, or a spell of devastation from the Kasrathik scrolls.

Noah Er, we're First Person Shooters, don't do roleplay. That's for white boys.

Gorkem I'm a white boy.

Noah No doubt, though most round here would. I'll catch Dessy on his way back.

Noah *exits*

Gorkem In Kurdistan I'm white.

Shirin You sound like my dad. Iranians think of themselves as white.

Gorkem Iranians think of themselves a lot (*they break*) Your father, he's been here for a long time?

Shirin Tell you what, I'll tell you a bit about my family, if you tell me a bit about yours.

Gorkem Rebin was right, it's all business with you Golpayeganis.

Shirin I wouldn't listen to his gobshite.

Gorkem No, he is a total dick splash.

Shirin Did you have to look that up on the internet?

Gorkem It doesn't know what it means, says something about splashing your penis in grandmother's tea.

Shirin (*laughs then scrolls down her phone*) Some people believe Apo Ocalan is responsible for the death of thousands, including women and children.

Gorkem I know what some people believe. Who is telling you? The internet?

Shirin Sorry.

Gorkem Your tongue whips you know, first with the insult, then with the sorry.

Shirin (*puts away her phone*) I am sorry. I do want you to tell me. Not the internet.

Gorkem I have never met him, so it is only stories from my father. Once he was hiding from the Turks and the Iraqis, but my father said he always took this opportunity to get better at...what's this word (tracking)? K

Shirin Farsi?

Gorkem (*reluctantly*) (Tracking) F

Shirin Tracking.

Gorkem So they had been tracking a bear for two days. The light was going down the second day when they got close. My grandfather told my father he has to shoot the bear. My father has shot before, rabbits,

deers, but nothing this big. He hit it but did not kill it, and it ran. They climbed the mountainside and made a place to sleep. But my father, he could not sleep. Somewhere down in the forest the bear was screaming. It was dying. It screamed all night, until dawn, when my grandfather went down and found it and stopped the pain. My father told me that he never picked up a gun again after that.

Shirin What did your grandfather have to say about that?

Gorkem Why?

Shirin Well he was the leader of an armed resistance, freedom fighters, he was a soldier. Did he not think your father was, well, a coward?

Gorkem Coward?

Shirin (Coward) F

Gorkem My father is not a coward! And my grandfather never made this struggle. My people were always pushed and pulled between Turkey and Iraq and Iran, now even Syria.

Shirin Iran have always helped Kurdistan.

Gorkem Oh yeah sure, like when they train Hizb Allah Yumruki people to kill hundreds of PKK. Or when they drop bombs on Kurdish rebel bases. Or the way you look at our language like a dog language, worse, like a (mongrel) F language.

Shirin Mongrel.

Gorkem But I can speak your *perfect* language.

Shirin Not all Iranians think like that.

Gorkem What about your father? What does he think?

Rebin *enters. He goes over and starts checking the sprays*

Rebin You need to top up the polish and tar remover.

Shirin Why don't you do it?

Rebin (to Gorkem) Sleeping with the enemy here mate.

Shirin No one's sleeping with anyone. Especially you, gaming til all hours then dropping off with your joystick in your hand.

Rebin Wouldn't you like to know what I do with my hands.

Shirin Not in any detail.

Rebin Too much for you?

Shirin Doubt anything you got's too much for me. (to Gorkem) How about we 'don't find the right words' later?

Gorkem 'Prefer not to say.'

Shirin exits. Rebin disappears into the shack. Gorkem starts to unscrew one of the almost empty bottles. Rebin comes back out with the refill bottle, snatches the empty bottle off Gorkem and begins to refill it. Gorkem starts to open another one etc

Destan enters, prayer mat under arm

Rebin How was mosque? Wash away your sins, did you? Was thinking we could offer a service here. Fifty pence for a quick blast of the hands and feet before (prayer) A

Destan Don't be cheeky.

Rebin We've taken fifteen quid today. We took six-hundred quid last week. Six-hundred quid in total. Doesn't even cover our wages. Thing is, I checked the books. Figures look very different.

Destan (Gorkem, go on a break) K

Gorkem (But I just had a /) K

Destan (Do what I tell you, please) K

Gorkem goes

Destan I'm sure business will pick up.

Rebin Which business is that?

Destan You'll have plenty of customers on your hands when there's just two of you.

Rebin That's right, just when things start to slide you decide to sod off back to Soran.

Destan Pesar, I haven't been back in fifteen years.

Rebin And you deserve to, Destan-jaan, but why now?

Destan To see my family.

Rebin You couldn't afford it before.

Destan I borrowed some money.

Rebin Good old Shapur. We'll always be indebted to him.

Destan He's given us work, a wage /

Rebin Overtime.

Destan We only operate inside business hours, you know this.

Rebin Really? Is that what you were just talking to Noah about?

Destan No, we were talking about...his badges. We must have washed his badges off the car the last time he was here because he was asking me where /

Rebin I think you need to go wash your hands and feet again.

Destan (*angry*) Maybe none of this would have happened if you had concentrated on getting more customers instead of playing your stupid computer games or dancing around with Shirin (*calms*) it's not forever, Rebin.

Rebin That's what the Home Office say.

Destan When I return, we'll make sure things get back to normal. I promise. Just make sure the business runs smoothly while I'm away.

Rebin *picks up the phone and dials*

Rebin (*phone*) Customer number 487657....Yep...can we have 3 gallons of TFR mix...2 gallons wheel blackener...need a couple of bags of washers for the large jet spray nozzles.

Destan *gives him a thumbs up and leaves. Rebin watches him go*

Rebin (*phone*) Yeah, I'm here...still here.

3

Gorkem puts on some music, French hip hop, setting up the carwash much as Rebin did at the beginning, including tripping a fuse and getting a shock, and ending by shooting at the air fresheners with the hand sprays.

Gorkem Simco, Ferhad, Ziryan, Elend, Hemin, Yado

Rebin enters from the shack, he holds a letter and is on the phone. Gorkem tries to talk to him throughout, Rebin tries to ignore

Rebin *(phone)* Rebin /

Gorkem Rebin.

Rebin Rebin!

Gorkem We need new air fresheners.

Rebin No, not Robin. *Rebin.* R ... E /

Gorkem And the hose is not working properly.

Rebin Hassani ... Hassani ... two S and I at the end.

Gorkem *(to the beat)* Hassani, Hussein, Arabi na Kurdi /

Rebin *(hand up to stop Gorkem)* Yeah ... Yes ... I've got the letter ... yes ... I'm just not sure what to do next ... so I can't do anything? ... what about work? ... and college? ... so what are my options?... *(he throws down his phone)*

Gorkem You did not say please or thank you, they will throw you back.

Rebin *(loses it and smashes the stereo to pieces)* What - is - this - shit!?

Gorkem Hip hop. French.

Rebin They'd hate you even more over there.

Gorkem What's your problem?

Rebin What's my problem? Oh fresh fish if only /

Gorkem Hey, I'm not so fresh no more.

Rebin So how about making more money? You know the Albanians on Lea Road do much better business, so they get loads more tips.

Gorkem Why don't you go and work for them?

Rebin Why don't you (kiss my balls) K.

Gorkem *(laughs)* You haven't got any.

Rebin Says the man who's not prepared to take a risk. I'm trying to help Destan, and you /

Gorkem And you.

Rebin Will you not just hear me out? We can't drop the prices, Shapur won't have that /

Gorkem (Typical Persian fat cat) K.

Rebin So the only way we can get more customers is if something goes wrong at the other carwashes. Like maybe their hoses get blocked.

Gorkem You mean you're going to block their hoses.

Rebin Alright, how about putting paint stripper in the TFR mix?

Gorkem That would damage the cars.

Rebin Which would lose them business and drive it our way.

Gorkem But you would get caught.

Rebin How?

Gorkem Because of the paint stripper.

Rebin So we'd have to make it (untraceable) K...invisible.

Gorkem Why don't you swap the colour in all the bottles? Then they could make a shit mess of someone's car seats instead. You're a piece-of-shit (treacherous Hussein dog) K

Rebin Hey! I'm not your enemy. Look, this place is going down the drain. Shapur doesn't care, he's got other businesses. If things don't pick up, then we're history.

Gorkem So we find a new job.

Rebin Easy for you. Destan's been here ten years. You think he can just walk into another job? This is all he knows.

Shapur *enters*

Shapur Rebin, how's business? Coping without Destan?

Rebin It's hardly Piccadilly Circus.

Shapur Have you heard from him?

Rebin He WhatsApped yesterday, he's doing the rounds.

Shapur Maybe one day you can go back.

Rebin I don't want to go back. (*showing him the letter*) They've frozen my national insurance. Now I don't have the right to college. Or work. They tell me I should go through a private solicitor, but it's expensive.

Shapur Well, you always have a job here.

Rebin It's not enough, if I need a private solicitor then /

Shapur You have to make the best with what you're given. Tell me Gorkem, do you know where the Kurds came from originally?

Gorkem Where we came from?

Shapur Before Mohamed, before Zarathustra, there was the thousand-year reign of the demon king Zahhak, who was cursed with a serpent that grew from each of his shoulders. Eblis, the very devil that cursed him, disguised himself as a physician and attended to the king. He told Zahhak that he could appease the snakes by giving them nothing but human brains to eat. Every night two young men were brought to the palace, executed, and their brains made into meals. On hearing of Zahhak's murderous deeds, two noblemen were resolved to help. Disguised as cooks, they killed one man and set one free, mixing the human brains with sheep brains so as not to arouse suspicion. The men they set free, they sent onto the plains and into the mountains. They gave them goats and sheep to live off, and it is the Kurdish people that are descended from these men.

Rebin Except now we herd cars instead of cattle.

Shapur Rebin, don't spoil it for the boy. Let the mystery of the /

Gorkem No, I get it. This is where the Kurdish people came from. Straight out of a Persian myth. And these noblemen, these cooks that save the guys' lives. Persian, right? Of course. Like a saviour. Like our saviour. And we have to be grateful. Well, thank you. Please, thank you, and don't throw me back.

Shapur *smiles and exits*

Gorkem *goes over to the blue barrel and takes out the washcloth*

Gorkem When the Turkish closed the borders in the north, my grandfather would send Kurdish farmers to herd sheep across, bringing back guns strapped underneath them when they returned. If you put the paint stripper in the TFR mix it would be like strapping guns to the top of the sheep. Clear for all to see. But if you found a way to hide the weapons...

Gorkem *drops the woolly cloth on the gravel floor, picking it up he reveals the bottom to be covered in stones*

Gorkem Just a few, first thing in the morning while their eyes are still in bed.
 Maybe they wash 5, 10 cars before they notice.

Rebin Or until the customers come back fuming.

Gorkem And then never come back again.

Rebin Your grandfather taught you well.

Gorkem Only through stories.

Rebin Now that's guerrilla warfare.

Gorkem Except with sheep.

Rebin Except with sheep.

*

Rebin puts on a headset, Noah does the same. They are in their respective accommodations, gaming.

Shapur at the carwash. Shirin enters, distracted by her phone

Rebin Hello?

Shirin Bobs?

Rebin You there?

Shirin Where are the boys?

Noah Hello?

Shapur I gave them the afternoon off.
 I needed to check the books,
 take stock.

Shirin I'll pop back then /

Shapur Shirin.

Noah Hello?

Shapur Why don't we talk anymore?

Rebin Hello, hello, hello.

Noah Hello, hello, hello.

Shirin We're talking now, aren't
 we?

Rebin Hello?!

Rebin *gives up, picks up his phone and dials.*

Noah *(phone rings, picks it up)*
Hello?

Rebin *(phone)* What's up fam?

Noah How come the headsets aren't working?

Rebin You can't be part of a party and a private chat at the same time, or have you forgotten?

Noah So what do I do again?

Rebin Quit the party, leave the chat, I'll set up a party and invite you.

Shapur How's university?

Shirin Full of charlatans, can't wait until it's over.

Shapur Good, then you can concentrate on your career.

Shirin Thinking of going into the voluntary sector.

Shapur Voluntary? You mean working without pay? What idiot works for no money?

Shirin If that's all you want to talk about *(she goes to leave)*

Shapur Ok, then let's change the line of communication.

Shirin Go on.

Shapur Family.

Shapur It would be quite the party.

Shirin A very exclusive one.

Shapur Well we don't want riff-raff there.

Shirin Need to keep it tight-knit.

Shapur Maybe you could invite some of your university friends?

Noah *(headset)* Can you hear me now?

Rebin *(headset)* Got ya.

Noah Forgot these old-school consoles are proper medieval.

Rebin Not good enough for you?

Noah Too many gremlins. I'm telling you Rebin, you've got to get the next gen.

Rebin Got bigger things to worry about.

Noah Bigger is where it's at. The worlds are expansive, and the framerate makes for seamless gameplay. But it's the graphics, pixels per square inch means there's too much detail, even for the human eye.

Shirin *(mocking)* But bobs, none of them are Iranian.

Shapur Maybe you're right.

Shirin Can you hear yourself?

Shirin Eyes too close together. It's like they're looking at each other.

Shapur But he has such a big heart.

Shirin Probably caused by a genetic defect.

Shapur And he's financially secure.

Shirin I'm not marrying my cousin dad.

Shapur Second cousin. And why not? He's very generous with his family.

Rebin You're making it sound like a sales pitch

Shirin How do you make everything sound like a sales pitch?

Noah That's cos it's rare. Speed, storage, graphics, playability. Gotta give it props.

Rebin Maybe you should go work for them.

Noah Already got a job.

Rebin A little something on the side?

Noah Moonlighting? Nah, like to keep it all above board.

Shirin All above board?

Shapur Yes. When everyone's family, then there is only trust.

Shirin All above board, in a tiny genetic pool, on the vast deck of the bloated ship, simply known as 'Family'.

Shapur I suppose you'd prefer someone like Rebin?

Shirin He's kinda cute.

Rebin On your wage?

Shapur On his wage?

Noah (*game*) Boom! You see me clip that guy?

Rebin I thought they cost hundreds of pounds?

Noah Been saving up.

Rebin Since when?

Noah Got some extra shifts.

Rebin Definitely something extra about you.

Noah What you saying Rebin?

Shirin What are you saying bobs?

Shapur I know you find this street level existence exciting but Shirin, khanom, they wash cars for a living.

Shirin What about Gorkem? He's a star at spoken word.

Shapur (*snorts*) I can speak words.

Shirin He's a performance poet bobs. He's an artist.

Shapur Oh he's an artist. That's just where I want your inheritance to go /

Shirin Bobs /

Shapur On some opium-smoking /

Shirin It's not Iran /

Shapur Revolutionary-flag-waving /

Shirin And it's not forty years ago /

Shapur Artist...He's a story to you Shirin. So why don't you write it and move on.

Rebin Noah?

Shirin Boba?

Noah What?

Shapur Hm?

Rebin I want you to be straight with me.

Shirin I want you to be honest with me.

Shirin You're not exploiting them, are you?

Rebin You're not involved, are you?

Shapur I pay them like princes.

Noah Involved?

Rebin With Destan and Shapur.

Shirin And these phone calls at night?

Noah What have you heard?

Shapur What have you heard?

Shapur Have you been listening?

Shirin *(sheepishly puts away her phone)* No

Shapur Protect your family first Shirin.

Noah Makes sense you want to protect them.

Rebin Shapur's looked out for me. All the time I've been here he's made sure I've got a roof over my head /

Shapur The roof over your head /

Rebin Money in my pocket /

Shapur The money in your pocket /

Rebin But fam /

Shirin But bobs /

Noah But *fam* what?!

Shirin These phone calls in the middle of the night /

Shapur I told you it's your uncle Tamoures in Iran...you know, his son's just turned eighteen.

Shirin Jesus Christ, I'm not marrying my family!

Noah Fam this, fam that. I ain't your fam! I ain't your bro, or your broheim, or your bredren. I'm not your boy, or your homie, or your blood. Stop talking like that!

Shapur Why are you talking like this?

Noah I'm old enough to remember the race riots around here, between the Black community and the Asians. There was an allegation that a young black girl was raped in one of the Asian shops.

Shapur He has money.

Noah Chatrooms and radio stations ramped things up and we came to war. They armed themselves with chains and knives. Murder happened.

Shirin What if I started dating Noah?

Noah Two young black men

Shapur The black man?

Noah Knew one of them.

Shirin He's got a name.

Noah The rape was never proved but this was really about the Asians being better educated, better financed, better positioned, hating on us worse than the whites.

Shapur Not my fair angel.

Noah And now it's you lot and the Eastern Europeans, some of who've never seen a black face in the flesh.

Shapur Not with a black man.

Noah So if I must tuck into another plate of 'black-this, black-that' bullshit, this time I'm having a slice of green with it.

Shapur Don't get me wrong /

Noah Don't get me wrong /

Shapur I'm not prejudice /

Noah I've got my standards /

Shapur But this is family.

Noah But this is business.

*

Carwash. Gorkem and Rebin

Rebin Have you ordered more Hoover bags?

Gorkem Yesterday.

Rebin What about the Polish?

Gorkem Same time.

Rebin And the air fresheners?

Gorkem Yes.

Rebin Complimentaries and liquid?

Gorkem Sorted.

Rebin Have you topped up the wheel blackener?

Gorkem Done.

Rebin Have you fucked Shirin yet?

Dawn enters

Rebin Alright Mrs. P. Been time.

Dawn What can I say, I missed my boys.

Rebin You know we can't do it for you cheap anymore.

Dawn That's alright love, I don't mind. At least I know if you make a mistake, you'll fix it. Those Albanians down the road, scratched up all the body work, then denied all responsibility.

Rebin Can't trust 'em. Scratches look pretty deep, but I think I've got some filler that might help.

Dawn You're a star Reb.

Rebin 5-star Mrs. P.

Rebin and Gorkem start the clean. Dawn exits

4

Destan returns. He puts on music, an energetic Kurdish folk song. He dances nostalgically. Soulfully

Rebin joins Destan in the dance. It is a spectacle, ending in a flurry. They laugh, kiss and embrace

Destan I hope you kept the suds bubbling.

Rebin Business is good.

Destan He still hasn't done the floor I see.

Rebin gets the logbook and gives it to Destan

Rebin Look at our takings already this week, and over the past few.

Destan This is ... well, I don't understand. Did you drop the prices?

Rebin Prices all on point. 'We have a name to uphold'.

Destan Any news?

Rebin I'm gonna have to go for a private solicitor.

Destan It's the best route. Outside immigration law. This way you can appeal against their delay. Home Office needs to answer 6 months after you arrive, after your first appeal. They take?

Rebin 3 years.

Destan And after the second appeal they should answer in 3 months. They take?

Rebin 18 months.

Destan This is what wins you the case. Their delay. Never mind the unholy wars. Never mind the bodies burning in the street. Never mind the (*he stops, holding back the tears*) never mind. It is their own failed bureaucracy that will win you the case. But you need to have the private solicitor.

Rebin I know agha, now I'm getting loads of tips, putting them aside, shouldn't be long before /

Destan *hands him a fat envelope. Rebin doesn't take it*

Destan For all your hard work.

Rebin I don't want it.

Destan I thought you'd be excited. This could be the start of a new life. Come on, why don't you ask me about home? You might be able to visit soon.

Rebin I don't want to go back.

Destan You cannot be blamed for what your parents were involved in, they cannot be blamed. Lots of people worked for Saddam's regime without knowing.

Rebin They knew. So did the kids at school, my teachers, the kids in my neighbourhood, the British government. Even Gorkem hates me for it.

Destan He hates quite a lot of things.

Rebin How's...home?

Destan Not home. Not anymore. For me? Yes. For my children? Too hot. Not nice food. I take my boy to play football in the park. He doesn't want to put the ball down. "Where's the grass?" he asks me. Where's the grass? He is scared the ball gets broken.

Rebin Bursts.

Destan Yes. Bursts. I don't know this country. My children don't know mine. My father asks me what I do for work. I lie, I tell him I work in the hospital. He says why are you not mechanical engineer, why do you not use the qualifications we borrowed the money for? He says I should stay in Iraq. They respect you in Iraq.

Rebin Easy for you to say, you're not a (treacherous Husseini dog) K

Destan *(package)* Then take it to secure your life here.

Shirin *enters*. Destan *hides the package*

Destan Shirin, khanom. How's your father doing? I haven't seen him since I've been back.

Shirin You'd have to ask him, can't bear to look at the man never mind talk to him.

Rebin *throws* Destan *a look*

Destan *(gestures off, to Rebin)* Customers.

The men get to work. Gorkem enters, extremely agitated. He holds up his phone to Shirin as it plays a recording of him from earlier

Gorkem "Coming out the war zone I split the microphone,
My weapon is my phone that records this mad tone.
"Take your shoes off before you get into the boat,
Here's a bag for your phone so if you drop it, it floats.
Your jewellery is sharp, can bursts the sides you see,
So the best thing to do is just give it to me.""

Shirin Can I explain?

Gorkem What is this?

Shirin It's a vlog.

Gorkem "Gorky O"?!

Shirin At least I didn't use your real name.

Gorkem holds up the phone, we hear Shirin's voice

Shirin "The grandson of the infamous Apo Ocalan has recently arrived on our shores, and he's not afraid to spit his way to the top"

Shirin I had to give it some context.

Gorkem I thought you were interested in *me*.

Shirin I was. I am. I wanted to celebrate you.

Gorkem holds up the phone, again we hear Shirin's voice

Shirin (*phone*) "Gorky O creates waves with words that ripple across cultures" What's this word Mrs. Dawn uses? Ah yes. Wanking.

Shirin That's a bit harsh. I can afford to be a little loquacious.

Gorkem Wanking.

Shirin Some news channels have picked it up. They've commented, think it's great to see a positive immigrant story for once. You know, if we get enough hits then we could /

Gorkem performs

Gorkem Newshound speaks through her twitching nose
Hope y'all ready for another media dose
No headlines, just worry lines while you refine the signs,
redefine the times without the crimes through which I've lived.
Earth quakes, lines break,
now something's gotta give.

Shirin Will you just listen to me for a /

Gorkem Bombs blast across 2D screens,
speakers flatten peaking screams,
faces you can't touch means nothing's as it seems,
but you don't really give a fuck when it's only news that haunts your
dreams.

Shirin Your rhythms all over the shop /

Gorkem Take it to make it
Can't shake it when you fake it
So I bait you cos I hate you,
but I love it when you take it!

Shirin grabs one of the jet washers from the barrels, hosing Gorkem down

Gorkem Stop ... stop ... enough!

Shirin *stops*. Gorkem *is dripping wet*

Shirin Got a spare jumper? You'll catch your death.

Gorkem *gestures to the shack*. Shirin *goes in*. Gorkem *takes off his top, burn scars across part of his torso*

Shirin Was it the regime?

Gorkem There is not a lot you can do to protect your home when you are a twelve-year-old boy. But we could make traps, and everyone can get petrol. But a twelve-year-old boy doesn't know how this liquid can move through the air like a ghost. How it can seek out the flame of a candle a hundred steps away. And when this liquid burns, a twelve-year-old boy does not know that this is different to a grass fire, and if you kick it, it's like dragon's breath.

Shirin I'm sorry Gorkem.

Gorkem I just wanted to protect our home.

Shirin Your grandfather must be proud.

Gorkem Apo is not my grandfather.

Shirin What? But...your stories? You were lying?

Gorkem What's a lie? At the border, the men who bring us here tell us when you land in England you tell them you're from Syria, because everyone knows where that is and what happens there. When I come here, they ask me where I'm from. I tell them I'm Kurdish, I'm from Kurdistan. But you won't find it on any map, so where is that? What does it mean when I say I'm Kurdish?

Shirin My father believed you.

Gorkem Your father also believes in myths.

Shirin He's proud of his heritage.

Gorkem And now he's more British than the British.

Shirin At least he doesn't lie about where he's come from.

Gorkem No, he just lies about how other people got here.

*

Next day. Rebin is on his own. Destan enters

Rebin Good, you're here agha. Gorkem's late and it's starting to fill up, any chance you could /

Destan goes straight into the shack and brings out a stand-up sign that reads "Sorry, We're closed". He exits and returns without it. Destan's eyes are black and there is a plaster over the bridge of his nose

Rebin Agha?

Destan We need to take stock.

Destan takes the stock book. Rebin checks the liquids

Destan Carpet cleaner.

Rebin Gallon and a half left.

Destan Window cleaner.

Rebin Two gallons and two full sprays.

Destan Glean 101.

Rebin Agha are you going to tell me /

Destan Glean 101.

Rebin Three gallons.

Destan Tar remover.

Rebin Half a gallon.

Destan Wheel blackener.

Rebin Say, two gallons.

Destan Is that two gallons?

Rebin Close enough.

Destan Air freshener.

Rebin Liquid, two and a half gallons. But we need more of the complimentaries.

Gorkem enters

Destan Good. Now let's check the sprays.

Rebin The sprays are working fine.

Destan We still need to check. We need to make sure this is a *functioning* carwash.

Rebin *and* Gorkem *squirt each of the sprays*

Rebin Check.

Gorkem Check.

Destan The blackener brush.

Rebin Check

Destan And the squeegee combs.

Gorkem Check.

Destan (*pointed*) The washcloths.

Rebin Check.

Destan Are you sure they're Ok?

Rebin Yeah, they're a bit worn out but /

Destan A bit worn out? I'm not surprised, they have never seen such activity. It is amazing. At the start of the year, business as normal. We bring in maybe £800 a week, 1000 if we're lucky. Then I go away and a miracle happens. Within two weeks the place is making twice that. So, what happened for such a miracle to occur? Hm?

Rebin We make a good team.

Destan Like a family. Right? My little girl, she loves the Peppa Pig. You know this video? We watch it every night after she has eaten and before bed. It's her routine. Like last night. Except last night there was the knock on the door. The Albanians on Lea Road. They forced their way in, did this (*face*). They turn off Peppa Pig, Azade screaming. I send my family upstairs and then they made *me* watch a video.

Gorkem What video?

Destan You see, they have a problem. Customers are very angry, fresh scratches on their cars after a wash. They find the stones in the wash barrels even after they've cleaned them out. Their washcloths are more

than, how do you say, 'a bit worn-out'. Then they find the nails scattered in front of the wash that are breaking customers' tyres.

Rebin Bursting.

Destan (*rage*) Do you think I give a damn-shit about my English right now?! They're losing customers meanwhile cars are queuing outside of this place. So, they get the CCTV and they catch the person that is doing this.

Gorkem Agha, it was me.

Destan I know it was you.

Rebin So why are you looking at me?

Destan You know we came here so we never had to get this knock on the door at night. So we didn't have to be worried about the men standing outside our house in the shadows. Do you know what you've done to my family?

Rebin What *we* 've done.

Destan So you get him to do your dirty work for you?

Rebin *Our* dirty work.

Destan We need to run a clean business.

Rebin We run a dirty business made up to look clean. And you're having a go at my dishonesty? We either run a legal business and sometimes use illegal means, or you can keep running whatever dodgy deals you've got going on through this 'clean' business, but I'm telling you it's not going to end /

Destan has picked up a length of hose and loops it around Rebin's neck, throttling him. Gorkem tries to intervene but is unable to pull Destan off

Destan They threatened my little girl! Do you understand that? Do you understand?!

Destan tightens his grip. Rebin almost loses consciousness. Noah enters and pulls Destan off

Noah Easy Destan, easy! Jesus. It's not Assassin's Creed.

Destan Take your hands off me.

Noah Why don't you take a walk?

Destan Don't tell me where to be.

Noah Just to cool down.

Destan You're right. *(to Rebin)* (It's the kiss-off. If I never see him again it will be soon enough.) K

Destan *exits*

Noah *(to Gorkem)* Oi, hip hop. Do a good job, I'll give you a tip.

Gorkem grabs the cleaning stuff and goes

Rebin Bare tips now?

Noah He's a good kid, you should lay off him.

Rebin You want his gamertag?

Noah Don't get all salty, I came to apologise.

Rebin Don't want it.

Noah You online later? Thought we could clip some 8-year old Americans.

Rebin Aren't you busy?

Noah Took some time off.

Rebin When's your next job?

Noah Got a pickup next week at the Hook of Holland.

Rebin Guessing it's not machine parts.

Noah *shakes his head*

Rebin How many?

Noah 20 units.

Rebin Units? That what you calling them?

Noah You want in? Drive me over, drop me off. I jump in the cab and it's a short trip back across the channel. Once I'm on UK soil I park up and just walk away. All the hard work's been done.

Rebin How long will they have been in there, by the time you get to them?

Noah Three, maybe four days (*Rebin starts to lose it*) but the trailer's well ventilated. Bed rolls, warm clothes, food, water, disposable toilet bags. Shapur's got it proper sorted.

Rebin 5-star service!

Noah Eight grand for a day's work. Almost as much as I earn in half a year. Drive me over, I'll cut you in five-hundred quid.

Rebin (*hysterical*) You know what this is this is just like that GTA 5 glitch in the side mission where you're playing as Trevor Phillips and you've got to go down to the Los Santos coastline to pick up a haul of guns but they're not guns and the cops are everywhere and you have to /

Noah Rebin. It's not a computer game.

Rebin So don't play!

Noah I thought I'd throw you a bone but if you don't want to help then /

Rebin I'll drive you. I can drive you, but we just keep going. Down through France, Spain, be in Morocco in no time.

Noah Never been.

Rebin Yes you have. Black Ops 4. Call of Duty.

Noah *leaves*. Gorkem *enters*

Gorkem I got a new console.

Rebin You in on this now as well?

Gorkem (*shakes his head*) I just work here.

Rebin Careful. You'll blink, ten years'll go by, and you'll still be here.

Gorkem Not me, I got my status.

Rebin Course you did. Grandson of the famous Apo Ocolan. Kurdish freedom fighters helping the Brits and Yanks. Bet they love you.

Gorkem Beats being a Hussein dog.

Rebin *advances on him*. Gorkem *pulls a knife*

Rebin Why don't you fight like a man?

Gorkem stabs the knife into the sofa. They circle each other. Rebin goes to throw a punch, misses. He throws another, misses again, Gorkem catches him with a

counterattack. Rebin's nose ruptures, blood gushes through his fingers, pouring onto the floor. Gorkem gives him a tissue

Rebin After the fall of Baghdad we got a dog. I think my parents were scared of what was going to happen, wanted some protection around the house. Friends weren't friends anymore, so he became my closest ally. Except he couldn't sleep in the house, he would just whine and bark and make a fuss. And just like a baby my father would have to drive around at night, with him in the back seat, until he dropped off. But when we brought him back in the house, he would just whine and bark again. So we'd leave the car window open, he'd jump in there at night and everyone was happy. That's when they came. They had petrol. I don't think they wanted to hurt anyone. They just wanted to scare us. They covered the whole car and set it alight. There was no way out. Have you ever heard the noise an animal makes when it's being burnt alive? That was the summer I came here.

Gorkem is jet washing the blood from the floor

Rebin What are you doing?

Gorkem Body fluids need to stay inside the body in public.

Gorkem leaves. Rebin puts on some music and starts to clear things away. As he goes to unplug the hoover he is electrocuted.

Rebin steps up to the edge of one of the puddles and jumps in, disappearing completely

5

Destan is in a fast-food restaurant, wearing the uniform, learning his new trade from Burger Girl (Dawn).

Gorkem and Noah are in their respective accommodations, gaming

Shirin visits Shapur in prison. Shapur reads a newspaper

B.G. Main grill. Patties need a minute and a half on each side before you flip them. Spatulas. Water. Wash and scrape off between each cook. This is your station.

Noah Station's heavily guarded.

Gorkem You're my eyes. What do you see?

Noah Three behind the sandbags. One in the ticket office. Two on the tracks behind the platform.

Gorkem So what's my next move?

Shapur So what's your next move? Now you've destroyed the family.

Shirin You need to check what side of the glass you're on.

Shapur (*newspaper*) "My father. The human trafficker". You recorded everything. The conversations, the carwash, the meetings, you planned this all along.

Shirin Not my plan...I don't understand, you always told me you had everything you wanted.

Shapur We could always have more.

Shirin And now we have nothing.

Shapur I still have my standards.

B.G. Standards of hygiene have to be maintained, so hairnets are obligatory. And you need one for the face if you've got a beard.

Destan I don't have a beard.

B.G. Stubble counts. Refrigeration unit at the back of the kitchens. This is where we store the meat. Fish, chicken, beef, bacon.

Destan I'm not really
allowed to handle
bacon.

B.G. That's why we
wear the gloves.

Gorkem (*shooting*) Gloves
are off you pigs!

Noah I'd drop a frag in
the office, then
one over the
sandbags.

Gorkem Leave none
behind.

Shapur Leave none behind.
That's what I
always believed.

Shirin You can drop the
horseshit now
bobs.

Shapur You have no idea
where we've come
from.

Shirin But I know where
we're at.

Shapur You always came
first, khanom.

Shirin Don't.

Shapur I always wanted
the best for /

Destan I feel sick.

Noah Leave none
behind.

Shirin You make me sick.

Shirin Don't you dare put
this on me.

Destan Can I sit down?

B.G. You've only just
started.

Shapur I cared about these
people as well.

Destan What about Rebin?

Noah What about Rebin?

Shirin What about Rebin?

B.G. Who?

Gorkem They would fly
his body back
home.

Gorkem But he doesn't
have any family
left back there.

Shapur Faulty electrics.

Shapur From what I've
heard.

B.G. From what I've heard you're lucky to be here.

Gorkem You're lucky Rebin did what he did.

Shapur Should have got that damn fuse box sorted

Gorkem Blew the whole thing wide open.

B.G. You're lucky to have a job, so take it or leave it

Gorkem Course, he wasn't so lucky.

Destan How long did you say for the burgers?

Noah I've gotta go.

Shirin I have to go.

Gorkem One more game?

Shapur Will you come again tomorrow?

Noah What level?

Gorkem Iraqi airfield

Shirin I don't think so.

Noah I'll give it a miss.

Gorkem Safe then. Later, fam.

Shapur I'm still your father Shirin.

Noah Yeah, later.

Shirin Do you remember when you used to tell me fairy tales before bed?

Shapur You used to love my stories.

Shirin You'd use an old Iranian trick and say "Now shut your eyes tight and don't open them, otherwise you'll let the sleep in".

Shapur You'd be asleep in no time.

Shirin I just had my eyes shut.

Shapur Once upon a time a so-called dragon slayer went to the mountains to kill a dragon.

Destan He searched among the rocks and finally discovered the frozen body of a great dragon in a cave high up on one of the tallest peaks.

Shirin The man brought the body to Baghdad.

Gorkem He claimed he killed the beast single-handed and exhibited it on the bank of the river Tigris.

Destan Hundreds of people came to see.

Shirin Meanwhile, the warmth of the Baghdad sun gradually warmed the dragon's body, and it began to stir, coming slowly out of its winter sleep.

Destan The people screamed and ran for their lives, many were killed in the stampede.

Gorkem The beast turned to the so-called dragon slayer.

Shapur Now frozen in fear

Shirin And ate him in one gulp.

Shapur Goodnight khanom.

Shirin Nite dad.

Off-White

Origins of the Concept

In the summer of 1996, I got my first job outside of working in my dad's newsagents. I was at university and although I had some financial support from my parents, as well as from student loans and grants, my dad never paid me to work in the shop (unless you include Mars Bars and the occasional packet of cigarettes). I needed more income so applied to a temping company, where one of my first jobs was a nightshift in a factory, packing frozen chips. The security guard who signed us out in the mornings was a brutal-looking White man, who always had a canon of racist jokes waiting for us. The first few mornings, due to heady mixture of fear and exhaustion, I would placate the 'humour' and laugh at his insults.¹ By the end of the week, I had had enough, and as he reeled off his repertoire, I just dead-eyed him. On the way back to the car, he called me into his office and asked if I had ever considered being a security guard because "you look like you don't take no shit." I was speechless, not the response I was expecting. I was also flattered, and the prospect of wearing a uniform and having a radio on my shoulder appealed a lot more than packing chips. I took him up on the offer, but there was something about that situation that continues to haunt me, and relates to other incidences in my life. What kind of person would knowingly take a job from a racist? How often do we stand by and allow racist aggressions - from micro to macro - to pass, without doing anything about it? And for those of us that are *allowed to pass* as White, how does this complicate the situation further? These were the questions that motivated the writing of my second play, *Off-White*.

Social/Political/Historical Background

Historically, the notion of 'Whiteness' has always been under threat, and the formation of groups that adopt the defensive ideologies of White supremacy stretch back over centuries. In the past, these people were often decried as being "backward" or "extremist", but still only in the minority. However, it is only in recent years that these ideas have begun to manifest more publicly and,

¹ On the first morning he read my surname as "Pesh-man", before proceeding to mock, "Pesh?...Pesh?...Isn't that what an Irishman does when he goes to the toilet?" As is evident, he did not do racism by halves. In fact, he often doubled-up on it.

disconcertingly, appear to have become more universally accepted. The increased visibility of these viewpoints has a lot to do with modern technology and the rise of social media, but the fear that these attitudes have become more widespread is very real one, especially for some people of colour. Brexit might have been orchestrated by protectionist entrepreneurs like Arron Banks who claimed it would be good for British business, but it was sold to the British citizens primarily on the grounds of curbing the ‘unsustainable’ influx of immigrants. This, concurrent with the inauguration of a tycoon president in the US, who claimed he was going to “Make America Great Again” by investing in national enterprise and infrastructure, as well as building a big wall between the United States and Mexico to stop the flow of illegal immigrants. The rise of these neoliberal nationalists has no doubt made such personal prejudices both visible and audible in the everyday, but also increases the appeal of such beliefs to the everyman. No longer relegated to some “backward” minority out in the sticks, these ideas are now being represented in the mainstream, and by incredibly powerful (read: rich) metropolitans. The phenomena that followed is something I investigate in my first chapter, which is, despite neoliberalism claiming to flatten out beliefs in racial and ethnic hierarchy, it causes them to rise up in more virulent forms. In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, this is shown to manifest as Asians using their new found wealth and power in England to dominate the White working-classes, inverting the established structure of White over Brown. However, this was during the early neoliberal era, and three decades later, something very different was happening. More and more groups of White men were consolidating, marching, protesting and proclaiming that their very Whiteness was under threat. That their Whiteness deserved to be recognised, that they were becoming the marginalised *group*. Again, nothing new, but due to the widespread nature and exposure of this phenomenon, and for what I believe is the first time in history – Whiteness was starting to become recognised as a racial group *opposed* to the ‘standard’ which it had always been perceived, and the scholarly insight that “Englishness is just another ethnicity”² was a deeply unnerving revelation for the ‘natives’ who believed in the ‘purity’ of their Whiteness. There are many other factors that have resulted in this phenomenon (globalisation, increased visibility of people of colour, climbing numbers of mixed-

² A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora; Contesting Identities* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1996) p.206

heritage children being born etc.) but it is the fallout from this condition, along with my own experiences of racism, that inspired this second play.

Critical Connections

Off-White follows the life of NJ, a young, mixed-heritage (White English/Iranian) security guard working in a generic, English shopping centre. He abbreviates his name to conceal his foreign Otherness which, due to his pale-enough complexion, is the only thing that gives it away. At work, however, he cannot escape the issue of race; whether he is being asked to racially profile suspects, or taking statements from witnesses (all of which are White) who all appear to have racialised views, as well as his suspicions about his supervisor's (Kevin) racist ethics. NJ finds himself in an increasingly racist world, which is consolidated by his encounters with people of colour. The play opens with him trying to talk a Pakistani man, Musa, off the rooftop of the shopping centre. Musa's sister has been attacked in the centre for being a Muslim, yet nothing has been done about it. Out of his frustration, Musa begins to sabotage the centre, through disruptive but completely harmless means. NJ also encounters Albert, a Black, homeless man who appears paranoid that the 'system' is against him. When the electronic soap dispensers in the shopping centre toilet does not register his Black skin, refusing him their service, he tears them off the wall and wrecks the place.³ Kevin doesn't believe him, and bans him from the centre. Rejected, Albert overdoses on methamphetamine. For Musa, this is the final straw, and believing that the "world's not built for people like me and Albert" he decides to go the same way as his vagrant friend, intending to throw himself of the roof of the centre. As the evidence of a racism builds in the present, NJ 'flashes back' through a series of monologues, revealing times when overlooked, and was even party to racist incidents in his past. *Off-White* paints a highly polarised world, similar to the one we are presented with in *My Beautiful Laundrette* in the early neoliberal era, where there are obvious divides *between* racial groups. Some might argue, through the fact that we now live in a more global world, that we are becoming more racially tolerant.

³ A. Smith, "Racist' soap dispensers don't work for black people' in *The Metro* (July 13th, 2017) [online]. [Accessed 5th August 2022] Available at: <https://metro.co.uk/2017/07/13/racist-soap-dispensers-dont-work-for-black-people-6775909/>

Therefore, the abrupt lines that I draw between racial groups in *Off-White* might seem dated and even divisive. However, by connecting the theory of a neoliberal marketplace (which exists on a continuum of White ideological constructs, rooted in classical liberalism) that does not accommodate for people of colour (from the pay gap, to everyday, racist technology) with how these failings further mobilise people's racialised beliefs, my hope is that I have evolved ideas beyond the concept of racism based on skin colour that are explored in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. That is to say, I have directly included the *systems* that operate in the neoliberal society, systems built on racial bias in the first place, and the influence and damning effects that can have on both the Black and White (and all shades in between) population. In terms of form, *Off-White* drew a great deal of inspiration from the case study in my third critical chapter, *Chef*. Along with Inua Ellams' *Half God of Rainfall* (2019), and my own poetic beginnings as a writer, I saw great strength in the power of storytelling that can come from using spoken-word. However, it is a long road from experimenting with this form to mastering it.

The Evolving Work

Although there is some experimentation with form in *Ostan* ('crossover' scenes between online-gaming and the carwash), my intention for *Off-White* is more ambitious. The best writing has a 'voice' its own. This 'voice' is found in the way the story is structured, as much as it is in the use of language. In terms of language, and especially in theatre, it is as much about what characters *do not* say as it is their utterances. In both *Ostan* and *Paradaida*, the dialogue is particularly effusive, as the characters openly articulate their buried histories, vocalising their ethnic allegiances and spluttering out their grievances. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, characters in some of the finest historical dramas share these same descriptive traits. However, theatre should also be inherently urgent, a medium where presence is paramount. It is the characters actions in the here-and-now that define who they are, while exposition of backstory is always more dramatically effective when it is used as ammunition in the present.⁴ It is with this idea, that I made dialogue in the naturalistic scenes particularly sparse (in terms of backstory), while NJ recounts his past experiences in the form of

⁴ The phrase 'exposition as ammunition' is an idea that I first heard from April de Angelis, when I was completing my MA in Playwriting Studies at Birmingham University in 2000.

lyrical monologues. There are two further experimentations with form in *Off-White* that I hope to further develop. In the initial stage directions, it states that there are monitors around the stage. It is suggested that the scenes where NJ is taking statements from members of the general public and staff working in the centre, take place through the monitors. This makes practical sense, both in terms of these characters only having one scene (as it is difficult to justify employing an actor for just one scene in a ninety-minute stage play) as well it being a P.O.V. story from NJ's perspective, whereby these statements would have been captured on his bodycam. The other play-on-form is only present in one scene in this version of the play, where NJ tests Albert's assertion that the soap dispenser did not recognise his Black skin by using a black glove. In this version, it is accompanied with a voiceover from a paramedic who describes how Albert died. I have had to park two similar scenes, both also non-verbal though this time with no voiceover, as they did not fit the plot of the play's current manifestation.⁵ All in all, in terms of language, there are four forms in that I am juggling at present; naturalism, reportage, lyrical and non-verbal. With regards to structure, and through the use of different linguistic styles, the play leaps from the present (naturalism, reportage) to past (lyrical) throughout (similar to the writing in *Chef*) while the voiceover scene embodies both past and present. However, the plotting of the play is not yet properly honed. Ultimately, my aim is to create a sense of 'fracturing', through the use of different styles in *Off-White*, that reflects the atomised lives of us as neo-subjects, by creating new fault lines in racialised identities. Also, as the title suggests, NJ is going *off* his Whiteness, while realising/embracing his Brownness. This kind of polarisation is marred with difficulties, as it both implies a 'reverse racism' on NJ's part, as well as suggesting a certain sympathy for those misguided enough to believe that (their) Whiteness is under threat. As exhilarated as I am by the potential of this piece, there is still a great deal of work to be done.

⁵ One of these scenes is one of the employees dressed as a duck (see the 'duck scenes' in the play) as he tries to use foreign currency in a vending machine, under NJ's judicious eye. The other is Musa fiddling ominously with two different mobile phones, connecting one of them to wires running from his rucksack, in attempt to provoke Kevin as he profiles him from nearby.

Off-white

By Arzhang Luke Pezhman

Location

The central action takes place at various locations around the Happy Hill shopping centre. Monitors around the stage and can be used to represent different parts of the centre, display close-ups of the characters NJ interacts with (as caught by his bodycam), screen CCTV footage of events in the centre, as well as expressing events NJ describes of his life outside of work. NJ, Musa, Kevin and Albert should be played by live actors, other characters can be played live or through the monitors. Other than NJ, actors can play multiple roles.

Although the action jumps across time and place the narrative is driven by a singular and internal perspective with no pauses or breaks signified though tentativeness is constantly implied

Characters

Colour refers to skin tone

NJ	-	Security guard, off-white
Musa	-	Customer, brown
Kevin	-	Security supervisor, white
Martin	-	Centre manager, white
Woman	-	Customer, white
Albert	-	Homeless man, black
White Duck (WD)	-	Employee, black
Black Duck (BD)	-	Employee, white
Burger Boy	-	Employee, white
Paramedic	-	Voiceover
Pharmacist	-	Employee, white

*

Shopping centre roof. Musa stands on the edge, wearing joggers, a hoody and rucksack. NJ climbs through a hatch door in the roof, wearing a security guard uniform. He struggles to think of something to say

NJ Think I can see my house from up here.

Musa Nothing here looks like home.

NJ Great place to watch the sunset.

Musa Stare long enough, sun starts to look blue.

NJ You'll damage your eyes.

Musa Won't be needing them where I'm going.

NJ Like Neo, in *The Matrix*.

Musa glances at him

Musa Never seen it, officer.

NJ I'm a security guard, not an officer. And if I'm going to be honest with you, I've had nowhere near enough training for this.

Musa First time for me too.

NJ Jokes. Good, that's good. Good that you're making jokes. Isn't it?

Musa Didn't think it would feel like this. Thought there'd be more clarity.

NJ Things tend to blur when you stare into the sun, maybe if you give yourself a break?

Musa Doesn't look yellow anymore. I guess being exposed to one colour for long enough, means your brain stops registering it.

NJ Like wearing clothes.

Musa How's that?

NJ Like you can't feel your clothes all the time, you forget about them a few minutes after you put them on. Skin stops sending signals to the brain, otherwise you'd go mad.

Musa It's not true though, is it. We don't stop seeing colour, don't stop feeling our skin, no matter how much we're exposed. Still go mad.

Musa takes some coins from his pocket and drops them over the edge

NJ Making a wish?

Musa More of a warning. Don't want to hurt any innocent bystanders when I hit the ground.

NJ Like / *In Bruges*.

Musa If there is such a thing.

NJ Come on, you must have seen that one. Film about / two Irish hitmen

Musa I mean, what's innocent about standing by?

NJ One of them does the coin thing / before he well, you know

Musa Standing by while something terrible happens.

NJ I've got a copy / at mine

Musa When you could have done something.

NJ You could come over and watch it / if you want.

Musa Something to stop it.

NJ I'm doing everything I can.

Musa I couldn't live with myself.

Musa *turns to look at him, his face displayed on the monitors*

Musa Can you?

*

NJ Detect, deter, observe, report
That's a security guard's mission statement
Only intervene as a last resort.

Never wanted to be a security guard
just a job to fill a schism in my youth
earning enough to indulge various escapisms
from an ineffable truth
See I'm a gamer and a raver
Not no badge wielding dictator

Three hours ago
I was at some dirty disco
stamping my feet
and doing lines off a grimy bog seat
Security kicks in the door
throw me out another
they pocket my stash
got what they'd come for
What? You think they don't neck the lot?
Kicking in doors all night is hard work
they need their perks
I tried to appeal, tell em I was one of them
Or at least I was gonna be
but I was out on the street
Without enough chems to get me up again
but enough to keep me from sleep

I fired up my console and played til sunrise
then put on my strides
donned my shirt
and was ready to meet
my new boss in a new role at my new place of work

*

Security office. Accessories are laid out on a table as Kevin inducts NJ

Kevin You're late.

NJ Car ran out of petrol.

Kevin Hear all kind of excuses in this line of work.

NJ A fly got into the dashboard a while back, jammed itself under the arrow on the fuel gauge and now it's permanently stuck halfway, so never know if I'm running on fumes or not.

Kevin Nothing like excessive detail to stimulate the bullshit detector.

NJ Check if you want.

Kevin I've got a job, thanks. Just make sure you're on time if you want to keep yours.

NJ Yes boss.

Kevin And polish your shoes for tomorrow.

NJ Gotcha.

Kevin Good. Then welcome to Happy Hill, the shopping centre that time forgot, located just outside the middle of nowhere. Let's get you accessorised (*picks up and reads name tag*)

Kevin hands him the accessories as he goes through them, starting with a name tag which he reads before handing over

Kevin NJ. That your name?

NJ My initials.

Kevin Short for?

NJ Nothing.

Kevin And the J?

NJ James.

Kevin Ok Nothing James, your shoulder tags.

NJ You mean epaulettes?

Kevin Well excuse-moi, do I look French lad? Can't even remember his own name and he's here talking to me in a foreign language. We call them shoulder tags, comprende? Silver letter and digits, S15 that's your number. Next your CB radio. We transmit on channel 9, tuner's set so no need to fiddle, just press the button and speak.

NJ *(into radio)* Hello? Hellooooo /

Kevin It's not a mobile and you're not talking to your mates. Always start with your letters and numbers so we know who's speaking.

NJ *(into radio)* This is NJ S15.

Kevin You're not registration of a car or a bloody postcode. This isn't postcode wars G-star.

NJ This is S15 /

Kevin Phonetic alphabet, and remember to include who you're addressing first, which is usually here. Control.

NJ Control this is Sierra 15, over.

Kevin Good, and when you want to end transmission.

NJ Over and out.

Kevin Right. Stab vest.

NJ Whoa.

Kevin Just a precaution.

NJ You ever been stabbed?

Kevin Don't want to scare you on your first day. Let's just say, not on this job. Radio slots in your left breast pocket, bodycam in the right. Turn it on at the start of your shift, back on the charger at night. Always keep it rolling cos this can save your career. First aid kit fits on the back of your belt, defibrillator at the top of the north corridor, you've had the training you know how to use it. Like the stab vest, let's hope you never have to. Now your last piece of kit can be a face saver if things get rough. Tie, clip-on, why?

NJ Clip-on tie?

Kevin Why?

NJ Why clip-on tie?

Kevin Why would a security guard wear a clip-on tie?

NJ *(thinks)* Why clip-on tie?

Kevin Come on, first reason that pops into your head.

NJ Cos they're too stupid to do up a real one?

Kevin Charming.

NJ Sorry, first that came into /

Kevin No, I appreciate your honesty. Good trait to have as a security guard.

NJ Thanks.

Kevin But it's not the right answer now, is it smart arse. Reckon you can put it on yourself?

Kevin throws him the tie. NJ struggles to put it on. Kevin helps

Kevin This a summer job for you, son?

NJ What do you mean?

Kevin You know, bit of extra pocket money, saving up for something. Back-packing, maybe? Or uni?

NJ Something like that.

Kevin In-between jobs though, right? Not thinking of making a career of it?

NJ Hadn't thought that far ahead.

Kevin That's what I reckoned *(to himself)* Why do they always send me the part-timers?

Kevin steps back, getting into role

Kevin Oi, dickhead!

NJ Bit much.

Kevin Oi, security man!

NJ Oh I see, we're doing /

Kevin Come here, I wanna talk to you.

NJ Should I be /

Kevin You think you're so tough, dontcha. Big man in his uniform, think you're so tough.

NJ (*getting into it*) Listen sir, maybe you should /

Kevin Sir, oh lah-di-dah-Sir now is it?

NJ If you'll just calm /

Kevin I'll give you Sir!

Kevin grabs his tie and goes to hit him. NJ pulls away and the tie releases.

NJ Right.

Kevin Got it?

NJ Clever.

Kevin I guess intelligence is relative.

Kevin throws him back the tie, NJ struggles to put it on

Kevin Let's get something straight Nothing James. 99% of the time nothing really happens on this job. (*flicking through images on the monitors*) We keep smokers away from the entrances and boy racers from doing donuts on the carparks. We talk down crazy preachers who scream heresy in the World Food isles of the supermarkets. We chase skaters out of the centre before they axle-grind chunks off the marble flower beds. We use chocolate bars to bribe the homeless out from the soft furnishing sections of the department stores. We escort salesclerks on cash runs so they can safely deposit shop takings at the bank. We move on groups of gamers from congealing around the front of the computer swap shops. Remember they're mostly used to being in virtual spaces so their social skills can be a bit "online". Same with each of these groups, you need to adapt your approach accordingly.

NJ I'm a chameleon.

Kevin Good, you need to blend in because most of the time we just watch.

NJ Detect, deter, observe, report.

Kevin The smokers, skaters, boy racers, homeless, all that lot, just low-level disruption. We're actually tracking the more serious offenders, and you need to learn to look out for the signs.

NJ Signs?

Kevin How would you recognise a shoplifter?

NJ Bulging jacket?

Kevin More likely they will have their jacket hung over their forearm, that way they can quickly conceal any items they pick up. And more often they're not working as individuals but in groups.

NJ Groups?

Kevin Gangs, posses, crews, whatever you want to call it. You can often spot them a mile off. For example, how do you think you'd recognise a skater?

NJ Skateboard?

Kevin What about a gamer?

NJ Now this I can do. Posture, usually hunched, often with bad skin /

Kevin Though the homeless do share this quality, along with body odour.

NJ So we sniff them out?

Kevin Go for the visual clues first. Same with the more serious offenders. It helps to try and spot them before they've done the crime.

NJ Acting primarily as a deterrent.

Kevin Textbook. (*faces him*) Tell me Nothing James, did you ever play Cops and Robbers as kids?

NJ It was more Jedi vs. Sith, Gryffindor vs. Slytherin.

Kevin Cowboys and Indians?

NJ Bit before my time.

Kevin I suppose it would be Cowboys and Native Americans now.

NJ And the Native Americans would be seeking reparations from the Cowboys.

NJ *laughs, awkwardly, as Kevin holds his gaze for a moment before returning to the monitors*

Kevin You wouldn't be blamed for thinking our number one target for shoplifters are groups of young Black males.

NJ Wouldn't I?

Kevin You wouldn't, but you'd be wrong. Young Black females account for a much higher percentage of shoplifting.

NJ You're asking me to keep my eye on the Black girls?

Kevin As well as the young Black males. But times have changed. Since I've been here, I've noticed that there have been regular peaks in some theft, but also more aggressive behaviour in certain groups.

NJ What groups?

Kevin Young Asian males.

NJ Right.

Kevin Brown is the new Black.

NJ This is starting to sound a little bit /

Kevin A bit what?

NJ It's just that you're singling out /

Kevin I'm not singling anyone out, I'm talking about groups.

NJ Quite specific groups.

Kevin I haven't even started on the Eastern Europeans yet.

NJ Isn't this racial profiling?

Kevin We're security guards, Nothing James, all we do is profile.

NJ But not based on the colour of someone's skin.

Kevin How else are we meant to identify them? It's not like we know their names, Nakir. (*clipboard*) It's on your application form, remember? Nakir James. Interesting combination.

NJ Yeah, it's from /

Kevin I'm guessing it's from your mum and dad, that's where names usually come from. My parents gave me one too. Kevin, pleased to meet you, Nakir.

NJ So all that stuff about profiling /

Kevin Skin tone is just one of many ways of identifying suspects, along with gender, height, build, hair, clothing /

NJ It was just a test, you were just testing me?

Kevin This is not a test, son. When it comes to colour there's only one that's important in this place, the colour of the uniform. I need to know you've got my back, part-timer.

NJ *nods*

Kevin Start you off with a simple patrol. Four corridors; north, south, east and west. Ground floor and first floor. When you've finished your rounds head back here, radio if you get in any bother. No heroics, but keep your eye out for the signs.

*

Shopping centre, NJ patrols. Muzak plays over tinny speakers

NJ We all wear a uniform
For different occasions
Not that there are many occasions I frequent
But when I'm raving from dusk til dawn
I always wear the same uniform

The muzak begins to mix with electronic dance music, bass and mid-range increasing. NJ puts on a Fred Perry zip-up top, bright colours and 'go-faster' stripes

This is my dad's believe it or not
I know there's a rule about dads not being cool
But I think his Fred Perry collection hits the spot
The colours
The stripes
He's had these over 25 years
but they're bold as they ever were
And the polyester glides across your sweaty skin
When you're on the dancefloor giving it some

He puts on another one

Fred Perry was a tennis player
an Englishman who won 3 consecutive Wimbledons
when the Nazis were at the height of their power
A working-class lad
A self-taught sensation
An Olympiad on the tennis court
Pride of the nation

He puts on another one

By the seventies, it was mods and rockers that ruled the nation.
But the new young punks wanted their own fashion
They liked the smart style sported by the mods
Not so much the mopeds and couldn't afford the suits
So they skinned their heads, strapped on bovver boots
Pencil skirts, turned up jeans and Fred Perry shirts
Cloning a uniform of their own

Martin appears on the monitors. NJ takes off the Perry. Muzak reverts to normal

Martin Detect, deter, observe, report
 That's your job in short

NJ Some bloke in a suit snaps me out of my daydream

Martin NJ
 It's NJ isn't it?
 NJ have you ever noticed how there are no clocks in a shopping centre?
 Or how you rarely see the outside world clearly once you're in?

NJ Couldn't tell if was sweat or grease but his skin had a sheen

Martin Classic methods of skewing your perception of time
 so the clientele get lost in the shopping experience
 and just keep on buying

NJ This was Martin
 He'd found me doing my rounds
 and come to introduce himself
 The manager of commerce central
 Twitchy
 maybe a touch mental
 but clearly in love with the confines
 of this labyrinthine aggregation of retail outlets
 One of those blokes that speaks with such fervour
 Never know if he's excited or upset

Martin The corridors are loud and bright
 shiny floors reflect sound and light
 to drive the customers in through shop doors
 where the music's calmer
 The carpets
 softer

NJ I was getting the full 101
 in how these centres are built and run

Martin Now once they're in store
 we optimise the shop floor
 so customers can see more
 and go straight to what they're looking for
 We adopt the pinball plan
 so as they scan the shelves and clothing rails
 which are tipped and turned
 so consumers can "bounce" from one to the next
 Right up to the point of sales
 "Touch" "Bounce" and "Leave"
 is the mantra in which we believe

NJ He undoubtedly brought poetry
to the capitalist machinery of commerce central
but I was getting hungry
Surely it was time for lunch
Though it was hard to know if time was moving fast or slow
and I didn't want to interrupt the big boss's flow

Martin You'll find this design creates a system of channels
like a river network that carries
slow and steady
these consumer animals
into a series of shopping eddies
And as they're drawn into these vortices
they're made to believe in all seriousness
that they're having their own individual shopping experiences

NJ Now this very interesting for a manager maybe
but my stomach was rumbling
and couldn't help think what all this had to do with me

Martin You're here to keep the flow
Clear the channels to allow
this essential misdirection
and maximise purchasing potential
Now we've had trouble with
particular sections of society
that I'm not going to mention directly
So I endorse greater representation on our security force
to decide the right course of action
when dealing with these
shall we call them
factions?
Nakir
It's Nakir isn't it?

NJ That's the one

Martin Such an interesting name
where's it from?

NJ My dad and my mum

Martin *laughs*

Martin Of course
don't get me wrong
just
I expected you to look more foreign

NJ's *radio crackles*

Kevin (V.O.) Sierra 15, Control, over.

Martin Duty calls
I won't stall you any longer

Martin *disappears*

Kevin (V.O.) Sierra 15, this is Control, over.

NJ (*radio*) This is Sierra 15, over.

Kevin Been an alleged assault, need you to take a statement, over.

NJ Copy Control, where am I headed? Over.

Kevin Details just coming through. Stand by, Sierra 15. Stand by.

*

Shopping centre. NJ is all but back in uniform and taking a statement from Woman

Woman This gonna take long? Car's on the meter.

NJ Just a few questions.

Woman Only I don't really want to get involved.

NJ I assure you, it's all anonymous.

The Woman peers into the bodycam, her face writ large on the monitors

Woman Anonymous, is it?

NJ Office use only. You said you witnessed what happened?

Woman You've got CCTV, haven't you?

NJ Witness testimony is always preferred.

Woman Over a recording?

NJ All about the angles, and there's no audio.

Woman I didn't hear anything.

NJ The victim said he shouted abuse before he attacked her.

Woman He did shout something.

NJ Did you hear what he shouted?

Woman I don't really want to say, he said the F-word.

NJ Right.

Woman The verb.

NJ Ok.

Woman Then he said the P-word.

NJ The P-word?

Woman Yeah. You know? Noun. Rude word.

NJ Prick?

Woman No.

NJ Piss?

Woman I'm not going to say it, then I'll get in trouble.

NJ You won't get in trouble.

Woman Short for people from Pakistan.

NJ Got you. Then what happened?

Woman He called it her a few times then attacked her. I didn't know what to do, just froze. Like watching something fragile fall to the floor, everything moves in slow motion and you think *I should stop this, I could stop this* but you let it happen anyway.

NJ I know it isn't easy /

Woman No you don't, you don't know because he pulled of her headscarf and punched her in the face four, five, six times.

NJ It's not your fault /

Woman I could have said something.

NJ It's not unusual to freeze in these situations /

Woman Could have done something.

NJ It's ok.

Woman Her head shook when it bounced off his fist.

NJ It must have been upsetting /

Woman Shouldn't even be here anyway.

NJ Just a couple more questions, then you can be on your way.

Woman Not me, her. She shouldn't be here, wearing all that. I voted Leave you know.

NJ Right.

Woman I mean I don't agree with what he did, but we don't want no Sharia Law over here, do we?

NJ So I'm assuming the assailant was white?

She looks NJ in the eye

Woman Racist.

*

NJ retrieves the Fred Perry top

NJ Recently I've noticed a funny reaction to these tops on the dancefloor
Occasionally some bloke will give me a knowing smile
Now raves are notoriously smiley places but this was more
smile with a sly style
a smile with intent
like I'm meant to know the score
One fella even put his hand over the logo
then gives me a nod of acknowledgement
I was buzzing with chemical confidence
and just put it down to being popular

The skinheads had it right
A uniform to be proud of mate
But the Neo-Nazis nicked their style
And made the Fred Perry brand a shroud for their hate
Gave the skinheads a bad name
Right up to the present day
Where the Proud Boys
the new Neos
have rekindled that flame by wearing the same
the haircuts have changed over the decades
high-and-tight now rather than shaved
like those blokes giving me shady props at raves

He admires the top

I can see why they like them
these were worn before I was born
still radiant as the sun
bold as they ever were
colours that never run

*

Shopping centre entrance, outside. Two people in duck costumes, one Black Duck (BD) and one White Duck (WD). They are vaping, plumes rise from their oversized duck heads.

BD How much?

WD Fifteen an hour.

BD Overtime?

WD Double time.

BD I'm being plucked.

WD Time and half?

BD Time and half, ten an hour, they're plucking me. Do you get pension?

WD Standard.

BD Plucked and stuffed.

WD So find other work.

BD Was in an egg factory before this, hosing broken eggs off hot steal pallets.

WD The irony.

BD I'm not actually a duck.

WD Maybe you should go back to the egg factory then.

BD Ever smelt eggs half-cooking over several hours? Enough to make you regurgitate.

WD So quit you're whining

BD You hand out flyers?

WD Part of the contract.

BD Entertain the kids?

WD Bounce and wave.

BD Family shows?

WD Twice a day, eleven and two.

BD Ten, twelve and four. Three times a day.

WD Unlucky.

BD Plucked, stuffed and roasted.

Albert, a Black homeless man, enters

Albert Now I've seen skateboarding dogs, monkeys on bikes and dancing bears. I've even seen a terrapene flipping beer mat, but never in my days have I seen smoking ducks.

WD It's vape, we're vaping.

Albert Fish flavoured?

WD Rhubarb and custard.

Albert A duck with a sweet tooth.

WD No teeth.

Albert Then we have something in common my fine feathered friends, but no fear. We still have our hearts.

WD Here, here!

Albert Now if you could find it in those plucky avian spirits of yours to help a poor man out with a little change.

WD No pockets.

BD Seriously?

WD *shrugs*. BD *fumbles around inside his costume and gives some change to Albert*

Albert Thank you brother.

BD (to WD) What's the premise of your shows?

WD My three nephews have gone missing. I've got to find them. Clues around the stage. Help from the audience. That kind of thing.

BD Sounds like fun, I get shot in the face by a great white hunter.

WD He's hardly great. Little, fat man with a speech impediment.

Albert Rhoticism.

WD Pardon?

Albert When someone can't pronounce their R's.

BD Tough break.

Albert Worse hands could be dealt.

BD No, I mean creating a definition for someone who can't pronounce their R's, that begins with an R /

Albert If the system's not built by us /

BD Talk about falling at the first hurdle /

Albert then it's not built for us /

BD not even given the dignity to self-define.

Albert so it's built against us.

WD Please, my nephews tell me that these days everyone should have the chance to self-define.

Albert You can self-define all you want /

WD Personally /

Albert they still call you every name under the sun.

WD I call a spade a spade (*to Albert*) no offence.

Albert I won't take none (*rubs his fingers*) if you could give a little.

WD (*ignores Albert*) Can't be fun though, having a disability like that.

BD I do one extra show a day, get paid less, and for overtime. No retirement security, and you're feeling sorry for a white man with rhoticism? His gun doesn't have a speech impediment I'll tell you that much.

Albert Preach!

White Does your bill spin round your head, end up facing the wrong way?

BD When it works.

WD (*chuckles*) Classic.

BD Ten an hour, time and half, no pension.

Albert Could be worse.

BD Not if what he's telling me adds up.

WD Don't shoot the messenger.

BD I ain't the one with the gun.

Albert Truth to power!

NJ *enters*

NJ (*to the ducks*) If you're going to smoke you need to be ten metres away from the entrance.

WD It's not smoke.

Albert Who's this fresh-faced babylon?

NJ (*to Albert*) If you're not a paying customer, sir, I'm going to have to ask you to move on.

Albert Who's asking?

NJ Sierra 15's my number.

Albert Oh I've got your number, I'm asking for your name.

NJ *points to his nametag. Albert inspects it*

Albert NJ, what's that short for?

NJ Nothing.

Albert And the J?

NJ Sir, if you could kindly find / somewhere else to

Albert Huh, you lot are always so polite. Mostly niceties hiding nastiness.

NJ I have nothing to hide, sir.

Albert Except your name.

NJ It's not important.

Albert Not important? First thing you're given, probably the last thing you remember. What could be more important? My name is Albert Bembe Adekorafo Jones, AJ for short but I prefer Albert. Pleased to meet you.

NJ Nakir. It's Nakir James, now Albert / could you please

Albert Yes Nakir! My Muslim brother.

NJ Actually, I'm / not

Albert Knew there was something about you (*examines* NJ) yes, can see it now.

NJ But I'm not / actually

Albert That touch of extra melanin. Just a hint, mind. Can you spare some change brother?

BD (*to* NJ) Do you think it's fair?

NJ Look, I don't make the rules, we just need to maintain a ten metre, smoke-free zone / outside every entrance.

WD It's not smoke.

BD Not that. Do you think it's fair that he gets paid more than me? We pretty much do the same thing.

WD Except you do one more show a day than me.

BD That's right, I do one more show.

NJ Shotgun in the face, beak ends up on the back of your head?

WD Great when it works.

NJ Yeah, it's pretty funny.

BD Suppose you'd laugh at lynching as well.

Albert starts to laugh, the others look at him

BD Is nothing sacred?

NJ Yes, there should be a ten-metre perimeter around each entrance / which

BD Jobsworth.

NJ should be smoke free.

WD It's not smoke.

Albert (*to* NJ) How about that change?

NJ (to WD) Including vaping.

Albert (to NJ) Just need enough for a cup of coffee.

BD (to Albert) You know what I'm talking about, right?

Albert Ducked if I know, you're all duck-shit crazy. Quack quack.

WD (to NJ) I don't see any harm (*vapes*) smell that. Fruity.

Musa, a young brown man with scruffy clothes and a back pack, enters and approaches NJ

Musa Excuse me, officer.

NJ I'm not an officer.

Musa Can you tell me the name of your supervisor and where I can find them?

NJ Sure. His name's Kevin and he's just on his rounds, should be somewhere near the food court by now. Can I help?

Musa I need to talk to the boss, not a runt.

Musa gives Albert some change

Musa How you doing, Albert?

Albert Yes, Mus. Go easy on the rookie, he's a Muslim brother like yourself.

NJ I'm not Muslim.

Musa Nah, reeks of pig to me. Easy now, Albert.

Albert Easy yourself, blood.

Musa enters the shopping centre

Albert There's fire in that boy's eyes.

BD Then you must have smoke in yours.

NJ Which is why we have / the ten-metre perimeter

Albert (to BD) What you chatting on?

BD You don't see? I mean (*gestures WD and NJ*) look at them.

WD What about us?

BD You know exactly what I mean.

WD You're going to have to elaborate.

BD You want me to spell it out?

WD In bold letters.

BD You're white.

Albert starts to laugh again

WD Give me a break.

NJ Hold / on

BD There, I said it /

Albert Yes you did.

NJ Strictly / speaking

WD I knew it.

NJ I'm / not

Albert Ducking crazy.

WD (to BD) Sorry sir, your race card has been declined, please try another form of identity politics.

BD And you're in the wrong place, sir. Your meeting's down the corridor on the *far right*.

WD Typical, always end up accusing those with a different political stance to yours as being fascist.

BD Only if that stance happens to resemble a goosestep in jackboots.

WD Jockeys, wear jackboots. Geese, step. Probably makes them Nazis in your eyes. Anything that *resembles* even a whiff of an alternative is instantly treated with suspicion and suppressed.

BD Better than being dumb to the historic forces that have shaped us.

WD I'm looking to the future.

BD The lives that have been lost.

WD "Drive your plough through the bones of the dead!"

BD The poverty created.

WD Not everyone can be that rich.

BD The unequal pay.

WD Hey, you wanna make an omelette, you gotta break a few eggs.

BD Seriously?

WD Can make a bit of a mess, luckily for you, cos they're always going to need someone to clean that up.

BD *lunges at WD and a scuffle breaks out*

Albert (to NJ) This is your area, no?

NJ I'm not meant to intervene.

The ducks break briefly. BD kicks WD hard in the leg. WD punches BD knocking his bill to the back of his head. They continue to scuffle

Albert (to NJ) You just gonna stand there, do nothing?

NJ It's not in my contract.

Albert sighs and goes to break up the ducks, their costume heads coming off in the process, revealing that BD is a white person and WD is a Black person

Albert State of you, should both be ashamed. (to BD) You, your heart's in the right place but you need to get your own liberal house in order before you start thinking of coming to protect mine. (to WD) You, you need to stop being such a Tory and reconnect with your roots. Talk to your ancestors, it'll alleviate their suffering and yours, that's how we heal. (to BD) I think it's right on that you're addressing the wage gap, cos it's there, but did you ever stop to think (points at WD) that his company made ten billion last year, while yours only made two billion. Bound to have a trickle-down effect on the employees, no? And if you're not happy with your job then change it, or do what I did. Quit.

The two ducks sheepishly grab their heads and go

NJ Thank you.

Albert Can't just stand by watch people rip each other apart.

NJ But if you're not a paying customer, I'm still going to have to ask you to move on.

Albert I understand, but maybe you can spare a little change?

NJ pulls some change from his pocket and gives it to Albert

Albert Thank you brother.

Albert heads into the centre

NJ Excuse me? Sir?

Albert Got enough for a coffee now.

*

NJ Thank fuckity fuck it's the weekend
Starting to lose it
walking a fine line
down those dead-end corridors
no sense of place or time
navigating the public's misdirection
Staring at those shiny floors
lost in my own reflection
but it's the fucking weekend
so fucking come the fuck on
and let's fucking have it
Mate's birthday in Brighton

met his uni crew over tacos and beer
some Mexican place by the pier
There were oversized sombreros and fake moustaches
gaudy accents and plastic maracas
Anyways
they shed the costumes when the barman gave us the shunt
and on to the Concorde 2, a drum and bass venue out on the beach front
Now standing in line waiting for a club night when you're coming up
is never the best,
but standing in line
watching the moon light glimmer off the sea
ranks as one of the highest queuing experiences I can bring to mind
And besides one of my mate's mates is looking fine
but I shelve that cos this isn't the time to be distracted by our most basic drive
and once I'm in I'm reminded that heaven's what you make it
which for me is a dark, sweaty room with a floor that bounces
and walls that shake
You having a good night?
Ever been here before?
Want a zoot of this?
The tunes fly and this bae is all eyes and smiles
and I'm convinced the chemistry we're sharing
is more than just the powder we're dabbing
This is the 60s cultural revolution
reimagined by the 90s ravers
carried forward by this 20s generation
This is enlightenment
This is peace
This is love
This is unity
What a night
but the sun soon spies us over the horizon
long shadows cast shallow doubts across deep dark eyes
and it's off to an after party but that gets a bit leery
so back to my mates flat with his mates and this sweetie
drinking and smoking
conversation's ebbing not flowing
Topic of my name comes up
So where's that from?
My mum's English, my dad's Iranian
then there's a look
a breath and in all seriousness cutie says
That's just wrong that is
Roll back the cultural revolution
Trip the fuse on enlightenment
The white dove of peace is all beak and talons
love is only for the chosen
and unity is exclusive because
I'm just wrong

Before I know it
weekend's over
find myself
sitting on the white cliffs of Dover
senses trammelled
squinting out across the channel
trying to trace the route we took when we came over
But the fog is deep
and my whole being craves sleep
I've burnt the candle at both ends
using a flamethrower to light the wick
and I'm miles from home
Gonna have to call in sick

*

Shopping centre. Musa is sitting, scruffy clothes, hood up, rucksack by his side. Kevin, a security guard, enters

Kevin Waiting for someone?

Musa Looking for someone?

Kevin Got my eye out.

Musa Well, nothing to see here.

Kevin Just, you been sitting there a while.

Musa Been watching me?

Kevin You waiting for someone?

Musa You see what you like?

Kevin This isn't speed dating.

Musa That's alright, I like to take my time.

Kevin So take it somewhere else.

Musa Had a mate who's been speed dating, took loads of speed before he went.

Kevin Sounds like he misunderstood.

Musa Well, he reckoned, with 3 minutes to sell himself /

Kevin Did well, did he?

Musa Nah.

Kevin Can't imagine why not.

Musa *(imitating)* Do you like music? Love music me Dancing and all that What kind of music do you like? I like any kind of music me Just so long as it's got a beat I'm not letting you answer am I Your hair looks nice Do you use products? I love products me Do you want to ask me anything? Has it only been 10 seconds?! I haven't even started yet.

Kevin Alright, alright, I said I can't imagine. Missed out, be bothered to. Have you not got somewhere else you need to be?

Musa Can you imagine describing a shopping centre to aliens? They'd think it was great, because it's like this massive castle full of everything you could ever want. Speakers and sound systems and headphones, TVs as big as satellite dishes, food from all over the world, and the clothes. The endless, endless, endless, endless, endless, endless, endless rows of clothes.

Kevin What if they didn't have ears, or eyes, or mouths, or bodies? These aliens of yours.

Musa Well, they'd have to be kind of like us.

Kevin They wouldn't be alien then, would they.

Musa Sorry, illegal aliens. I meant illegal aliens (*looks around*) I mean, it sounds great, on paper, the shopping centre, but then you actually come to one of these places and you realise it's not built for you.

Kevin If you're not waiting for someone, besides the mothership, I'm going to have to ask you to move on.

Musa Why me? What about them? (*points*) They look proper shady.

Kevin Here every other day. Spend hours in the computer game shops, gawping at empty cases, no real threat. They might be bunking off school but I'm no truant officer. Anyway, they're on the move.

Musa (*looks around, points*) What about him? He's just standing there.

Kevin He's just got here.

Musa Reckon he's got something under his jacket.

Kevin Really? He's texting with one hand, got the other hand in his trouser pocket, so how's he holding it up?

Musa Armpit.

Kevin I'm sure his armpits are clean.

Musa Hope he's done behind his ears.

Kevin Will you take your hood down please, sir?

Musa What for?

Kevin To see your face.

Musa It's not covering my face.

Kevin It's casting a shadow.

Musa That's just the colour of my skin.

Kevin I know what you're trying to do.

Musa I'm just sitting here, officer.

Kevin I'm not the police.

Musa Minding my own.

Kevin Then take down your hood.

Musa What for? You're looking right at me, you can see my face, can't you?

Kevin It's not for me (*points*) it's for the cameras.

Musa Oh (*laughs*) right.

Musa *slowly bows his head, hiding his face further*

Musa You had an incident in here a few days back, girl with a hijab was attacked.

Kevin I believe my colleague dealt with it.

Musa Did you find who it was?

Kevin Is she a relative of yours?

Musa She's my sister, did you find who did it?

Kevin Even if we did, it's not the kind of information we can just give out.

Musa So you didn't bother.

Kevin We take these matters very seriously. Ultimately, we can't control the behaviour of our customers.

Musa And what about your staff?

Kevin I can assure that all of the staff in the centre work within strict protocols, one of which is zero tolerance for racial and ethnic prejudice.

Musa Sounds like you read that from a manual.

Kevin I do still refer back to it, despite over twenty years on the job.

Musa And what about your staff?

Kevin Do you have a complaint about one of my team?

Musa Nah, I'm just waiting for someone.

Kevin Who?

Musa Mate of mine.

Kevin What does he look like?

Musa About my height.

Kevin Right.

Musa Scruffy clothes.

Kevin Go on.

Musa Wearing a hoody, probably up.

Kevin Will he be carrying a rucksack by any chance?

Musa *(rucksack)* Bit like this one, do you know him?

Kevin He's not on amphetamine is he, because absolutely no illegal drugs are permitted in the centre.

Musa They only gave him that for the first part of his training.

Kevin Training?

Musa And it's not strictly amphetamine, it's stuff called Captogon. Same thing though, meant to give you courage before the 'big push', you know?

Kevin Can't say I do.

Musa Problem is he got hooked on the stuff. Started going out raving, speed dating, all that bollocks. Then he was up all night taking apart computers and making mini fireworks, shit like that. Lost it, made him soft in the head, claimed he'd found Paradise here on Earth.

Kevin Paradise?

Musa Yeah, you know *(points up)*

Kevin What's in the bag, sir?

Musa Stolen goods.

Kevin We know you haven't stolen anything.

Musa Do we now?

Kevin *points to the cameras again*

Kevin I learned to spot a wind-up merchant a long time ago, always spring them before they get the twist on me.

Musa Dunno what you're on about.

Kevin You're full of it.

Musa Meeting a mate.

Kevin Meet him somewhere else.

Musa Meeting him here.

Kevin Drop him a line, tell him you'll meet him somewhere else.

He gets out his phone, starts texting

Kevin I said, somewhere else.

Musa If I go and stand where that bloke was texting just over there, is that Ok? Like, if I put one hand in my trouser pocket, if I was standing over there texting, with one hand in my trouser pocket, then I'd be just like him. Wouldn't I?

Kevin I don't really care what you do / as long as

Musa I would though, wouldn't I? Be just like him. If I stand over there. Just another alien doing my shopping.

Kevin I don't have / time for

Musa I'm not though, am I. I'm not like him.

Kevin Look, sir / if you've

Musa That's why you came up to me.

Kevin If you've got a complaint, then you can escort me to the security office, fill out an official form.

Musa I know what happens here in broad daylight, crowds people around (*gestures cameras*) right under the eye-in-the-sky. You think I'm gonna follow you behind closed doors?

Kevin Well, you can make a complaint through our / online portal

Musa Complaining doesn't get you anywhere

Musa *makes a big deal of picking up his rucksack*

Musa I'll take it into my own hands.

*

NJ is messing with his radio

NJ Love my CB radio
 Had a pair of walkie talkies one Christmas when I was a kid
 We're all interconnected now anyway but this is different
 one channel feeding back to Control where with one command
 I could light up the console and summon a small army on demand
He presses the button on the radio
 "I want you to lay down suppressing fire with incinerators and fall back by
 squads to the APC."
 "Your husband's alright Mrs. Brody, he's fishin', he just caught a couple of
 stripers, we'll bring 'em in for dinner, we won't be long, we haven't seen
 anything yet, over and out."
 "Yippee-ki-yay mother f/

Kevin (V.O.) Sierra 15, can I remind you you're not in the Nagasaki building
 fighting off terrorists, or hunting a great white shark off the coast of Amity
 Island, or battling xenomorphs on an alien planet, over

NJ (*radio*) It wasn't a planet, it was an exomoon. LV-426 to be precise, over.

Kevin It's a film, Sierra 15, but if you must roleplay could you refrain from pressing
 the button on the radio. We need to keep the channels clear, you know, in case
 anything real actually happens. Over and out.

NJ My dad's what I like to call a Tryannosaur
 a bit back dated but does his best
 Passed on his love of 80s action films from the West
 a time when action heroes and bad guys were what they were meant to be
 pure good and evil, taking on the world without a hint of irony

They all had their uniforms
 John McClane in his dirty white vest
 Lieutenant Ripley in her Reebok trainers
 an act of flagrant product placement by the filmmakers
 Then there was dad's favourite
 Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones with his iconic whip and hat
 and John-Rhys Davies, the actor that played Sallah in the films
 Indi's contact and purveyor of Middle Eastern affairs
 Dad'd call me for dinner shouting "Indiiiiiiii!" up the stairs
 an Iranian mocking a Welshman playing an Egyptian
 in a twice removed depiction of a fictional character
 that if I stopped to think about it made my head spin
 What's for dinner dad?
 "Chilled monkey brains!"
 and like that he'd switch to mocking up Indians in the Temple of Doom
 except he didn't do the accent
 he had his own and that'd do
 Me and my brother did the accent all the time
 We used walk around the house chuntering "gudagudaguda" at each other
 and my brother would change my name to Nakvinderjit Singh
 all in front of our brown dad
 in a twice removed depiction
 an attempt to mock something close
 but without directly mocking him
 At least I thought that's what we were doing
 and dad didn't seem to mind
 would just stand by
 appearing to let it slide
 while we were in denial
 about rejecting our Iranian side

Indiana Jones
 The ultimate Western hero
 shooting from the hip
 with his trusty foreign sidekicks
 helping the poor Indians get out of a fix
 but saving brown people from brown people
 doesn't hide the fact
 that he was just another White guy with a whip.

*

Shopping centre roof. NJ and Musa as we left them at the beginning

NJ I'm sorry about what happened to your sister.
 Musa All we get from you lot is either hate or pity, when what we need is a little respect.
 NJ We took statements from witnesses but none of them got a proper look.
 Musa Turned to face the other way.

NJ Surveyed the CCTV footage, spotted him but couldn't properly I.D. him.

Musa Suppose he just looked like every other white thug you get around here.

NJ He was white, that much we got.

Musa Protecting your own then.

NJ I'm not white.

Musa Looks like it from where I'm standing.

NJ Mum's English, but my dad's Iranian.

Musa Then you've chosen your side.

NJ We have to stay impartial in this job.

Musa Working for racists?

NJ I'm just trying to get by.

Musa At what cost?

NJ Just trying to make myself a living.

Musa But can you live with yourself?

*

NJ Before I patrolled the corridors and halls
of burgeoning shopping malls
I worked for my dad in his newsagents slash convenience store
Like the stereotype
of every brown son that's come before
Except I'm not that brown
And of course I yearned for more
Not to say it wasn't a good little business
It earned our family a comfortable existence
As dad abided by the Western dream
Displaying tinsel and fairylights at Christmas
Fake blood and witches fingers on Halloween
He even had a stencil of a bloke in a bowler hat
Painted in the display window to show
The customers that he was a local cat
You know
That he wanted to fit in
He even changed his name from Farhad to Fred
For people that found it too much trouble
To venture outside their own cultural bubble
He'd greet customers with a smile
Engaging in some banal conversation
about the weather
Or how they're making heavy weather
of rebuilding platform 4 at the local train station

But I knew more
 From behind closed doors
 The resent was rising
 A beast was writhing
 Cos dad always blamed the West for the problems in the East
 All for the black gold hidden under desert sands
 He also blamed the inept and cruel government
 that continue to rule his homeland
 But he always put on a brave face
 from behind the counter
 Which is all you can really do
 when you're caught between a rock and a hard place
 There was one day in particular that sticks
 We'd been up since five
 to open the shop door for six
 Making sure all the newspapers, magazines and periodicals
 Had arrived
 Cleared the floor of the mounds of "literature"
 For the delivery kids to sweep up
 and head off to do their rounds
 Then the ground swell of clientele
 Passing through before work
 Picking up a copy of the Daily Fascist
 And maybe a bar of caramel or a strawberry twist
 One bloke was particularly ignorant
 Always ranting about the bloody immigrants
 While dad would come back with
That's right Alfie, I blame the government
 But this morning was different
 This morning Alfie made it personal
 His true colours shown
 When he looked dad squarely in the eye and said
Why don't you go home?
 Dad laughed it off as if he didn't follow
Five hours before lunch yet Alfie
Anyway see you tomorrow
 Lunchtime came and as routine
 Part time staff took over
 So dad and I could grab some cuisine
 A bap or a wrap
 Quick nap
 Before we're back for the papers at 4 o'clock
 We talk about Alfie
They're our customers son
We have to strive to get along
Or we won't survive
 And other words of wisdom such as
It's not the people that are to blame
It's the system
 A system where dad had to hide his Iranian side

To put food on the table to keep us alive
But faking who you are is no way to live
Something has to give

*

Security Office. NJ, Kevin and Albert. Albert is in a brand-new tracksuit

Albert It's the system that's broken.

Kevin Albert, rein in the ranting, will you? Just the facts, please.

Albert Cleanest I've been for ages, new clothes too.

Kevin You aren't keeping those.

Albert You want me to walk out here naked?

Kevin You tried that once.

Albert I was running.

Kevin And why were you running?

Albert Cos you apprehended me.

Kevin And why did we apprehend you?

Albert Because I'm a Black man.

Kevin brings up the CCTV footage on the monitors as he retells each stage

Kevin We apprehended you for stealing a bar of soap. On the way back to the security office, you requested to go to the toilet, which quickly became a demand on threat of immediate relief. You went and we stood outside while you did your business. Little did we know that your 'business' was to strip off naked, rip the soap dispenser off the wall, cover yourself in its contents before

The footage is distant enough not to be gratuitous. Albert is seen running from the toilet naked, slipping from the grip of security guards one by one until he ends up jumping in a fountain, washing himself off as the security guards regroup around him.

Albert Always wondered what those fountains were for.

Kevin Not public bathing, Albert. They're ornamental.

Albert Like so much in this world, but all you have to do is scratch /

Kevin You know you're not allowed in the centre.

Albert I was a paying customer. I was getting a cup of coffee (*gestures NJ*) your man here will tell you.

Kevin 'My man here' is in enough trouble for giving you money in the first place.

NJ I didn't know I wasn't meant to /

Kevin Save it, we'll sort it out later.

Albert Don't be hard on him, he's a good Muslim brother.

NJ I'm not / actually

Kevin Right now we need to focus on you, Albert. Theft, destruction of private property, public displays of nudity. These are serious offences.

Albert You even gonna hear my side?

Kevin *pulls up a chair, the monitors show a hyper-realised version of Albert's story*

Albert It's the system that's broken. You don't see it when you're a child. The books you read at school, the films and TV programs, you don't see it. Then you grow up and realise you don't see yourself anywhere. And if you do, you're a victim or villain, but mostly you're invisible. You don't see yourself, and they don't see you.

Kevin You're going have to be more specific, Albert.

Albert Plastic lid was too small for the cup, wouldn't fit so I had to force it. Cracked and got sugary coffee everywhere, so I went to wash my hands but that bastard denied me. See, the corporate world don't like people like me. I'm their mistake and they don't want to own up to it. Their dirty little mistake they want to wash away, but won't even give us the soap to do it!

Kevin You have to pay for the soap.

Albert They want us to disappear. They want to make us invisible. That's why the bastard denied me.

Kevin Who denied you?

Albert The machine. I think the people at the coffee place knew that would happen, so they gave me the wrong sized lid, and that's why the machine denied me. It's all connected, see? It's the same thing, us and the machine, because we built them. So, when they gave me the wrong sized lid, they knew I'd spill my coffee and then the machine would deny me. It's a vicious circle, see? We built the machine in our image so naturally it's going to imitate our prejudices.

Kevin What machine?

Albert The soap dispenser.

Kevin How did it deny you?

Albert Didn't give me any soap, that's why I had to steal a bar.

Kevin Maybe it was empty.

Albert Could see it was full.

Kevin Maybe it was broken.

Albert Watched it give a white man soap. Puts his hand under, gives him soap. Put my hand under, no soap. It's my right as a Black man to have access to soap, so I took it for myself.

Kevin Albert, didn't think you were one to play the race card.

Albert I'm not. The soap dispenser denied me because I'm Black, the people at the coffee place knew that would happen. The systems broken, it's a vicious circle.

Kevin Have you taken anything today, Albert?

Albert Apart a load of shit from you lot?

Kevin Just sound a little bit paranoid.

Albert (to NJ) You know what I'm talking about, the ducks were right. It's all fucked.

Kevin This isn't getting us anywhere.

Albert (to NJ) Come to think of it, you gave me money for coffee. You part of this as well?

Kevin You can keep the clothes, Albert, but I never want to see you in here again.

Albert Can't do that, this my manor.

Kevin Well you're going to have to find somewhere else, sorry.

Albert The machine is racist.

Kevin Can you hear yourself?

Albert The system's broken.

Kevin I'd rather not get the police involved, as you well know Albert, but it's either that or a life ban. Sorry, mate.

Albert (to NJ) And you're just gonna stand there, say nothing?

*

NJ Had the call that a lifter had grabbed a haul
 Left the shop floor as we followed her down the west corridor
 A chase across the carpark then into the dirt
 As she escapes into a wooded area on the outskirts of the centre
 where I was ready to follow her when Kev grabbed my shirt
 He winks and gives me a smile
 Then starts to bark all rabid and wild
*We know you're in there hiding away hunkering down
 behind the leaves and logs*
 then he starts up again with the sound of the hound
if you don't come out we'll send in the dogs
 And with very little effort our quarry is found
 she'd had enough cos she gives herself up
 while all the way back to the office

she's telling us how afraid of dogs she is
never caught on that it was all in her mind
that there was no K9
She was fourteen
Stolen a pregnancy test
cos she was too embarrassed
to be seen buying it
Kev took pity
Told me to make myself busy
While he opened the office door
Gave her chance to slip away
While we looked the other way
Now it's evolved that Kev always tried to resolve minor incidents inhouse
that he didn't like the police involved
Let her off with a warning
but I couldn't help start wondering
if he would have done that
had she been Yellow or Brown or Black.

NJ's radio crackles

Kevin (V.O.) Control to Sierra 15, over. Sierra 15, this is Control, over.

NJ Control, this is Sierra 15, over.

Kevin Got an incident, details just coming through. Stand by, Sierra 15. Stand by.

NJ Things always start small
Worth remembering when the call came through
From Clucking Hungry
an independent chicken venue at the heart of the food hall
One of the customers had kicked off
After someone put bacon in his Chicken Royale
Which for some would be a bonus
For most
Inconsequential
But for those with certain religious beliefs
This act is political
so we had to take statements from those involved
to try resolve the bacon-beef that had begun to unfold
I spoke with the defendant of the crime
The individual who was serving at the time
Burger Boy
Fair complexion
thousand-yard stare
short-wired brain
A zealot for computer games

*

Shopping centre. NJ takes a statement from Burger Boy (BB)

BB He's been in before.

NJ Ever caused trouble?

BB He always causes trouble.

NJ How so?

BB He always wants to change the menu. We're not one of these massive franchises, menu's fixed. You've got to have gherkin on your beef burger.

NJ He didn't like the gherkin on his beef burger?

BB He didn't order the beef burger, and I know what you're thinking.

NJ What am I thinking?

BB Probably one of them Hindus

NJ Why would I think that?

BB Cos he looks Hindu or Indian or something, and Hindus don't eat beef cos they're secret

NJ Sacred

BB Load of bollocks if you ask me

NJ So let's just stick to the facts

BB He ordered the Chicken Royale without bacon but it's a fixed menu

NJ You're not allowed to change it?

BB We can but if he didn't want bacon then why didn't he order the regular chicken burger?

NJ Maybe he likes the fillet?

BB Maybe he's just a troublemaker. One of them crazies. Blow himself up with that rucksack

NJ Is that why you put bacon in his burger?

BB You know, I was actually born in this place, just next to the information point on the east corridor. Luckily there was a doctor in Café Columbia and out I came into the bright, artificial light. True child of commerce...but him, he

hates this place, wants to burn it to the ground. Armageddon style. Can see it in his eyes

NJ The look in someone's eyes hardly counts as evidence. Did he threaten you?

BB He threw it in my face, he's got violence in his heart. They're all the same. I mean they're not, my mate Raz is alright, but other than that they're all the same. Violence in the heart, know what I mean?

NJ No.

BB Can I go? New first-person-shooter's come out and I am literally prepared to kill to get my hands on it

BB simulates murder, in a few different ways and in an increasingly aggressive manner. NJ dismisses him

*

NJ I'm not here to blame computer games
but I was playing a classic the other day
Battlefield 3
where the enemy were shouting back at me in Farsi
my father's mother tongue
So there I am
an Anglo-Persian
playing an American squaddie
shooting Iranian terrorists
in a future that's being pitched as not that far from fiction
This place is a mass of contradictions

Feel the need for an upper
Fancy a late supper
which is what we call an all-night-er
Code names for everything
Notice how we personify drugs?
Mary Jane/Marijuana
Billy/Amphetamine
Charlie/Cocaine
Mandy/MDMA
Well
we got whole phrases
Dimming the lights?
Smoking a joint
Tea for two?
Splitting a pill.
Quick go on the bumper cars?
Line of coke off the dashboard in the carpark
Then there's
A wee dab

Not a euphemism for anything
because for me
there is no substitute for amphetamine
Coke makes me antsy
Ecstasy tranqs me
Speed
quickens the body
sharpens the mind
but when the night is done
the real dance has only just begun
maybe it's cos you're fading some
that Billy decides to invite two friends to join the fun
Enter Paranoia and Psychosis
who come like a double-barrelled shotgun
Billy
you bastard
you don't really like me
I thought we were friends
I think I've come up too fast
Now Billy's given me the bends
Billy
the bully
who used my body
and dried my mind
crafting fine-lined cracks
that plough ruts in my reasoning
Billy
a despot
with no care for my plight
who's got the whip-hand over me held tight
now I'm enslaved
when I was just at a free party rave
Billy
The slave master
And
Of course
He's White
Good old Bill
Billy
William
White in name
White in nature
Should have known
Like Chaz
Charley
Charles
So White they're numbers one and two
in succession to the throne
Even the ones that aren't White
have White names

Mandy
Mary Jane
might be a bit hayseed
but it's all the same
It's all White
I know it's a leap
Maybe I'm just chemically insane
Or maybe I'm onto something really deep?
Is the world truly built strange
for those that have a different coloured skin to the main?
Nah
just paranoia and psychosis
playing party games with my brain
At least it's easier to live with that diagnosis

*

NJ Trouble at grill
Clucking Hungry
top of the bill again
as someone wearing a chicken costume
had pitched themselves at the entrance
harassing consumers with flyers
in what appeared to be either an act of vengeance
or a marketing stunt by other culinary suppliers
(reads flyer)
"This place is a scam
their food is haram
You want hallal
then visit the Friendly Falafel"
Now we were sure we had our man
but the poultry disguise was a cunning plan
made profiling much harder than before
Last seen flapping out the exit of the south east corridor
leaving a trail of leaflets on the floor
I was sent to ask potential witnesses
about the precise direction he went in
Characters we've met before
employees of stores that sell merchandise
by rival cartoon studios
Monochrome in stereo

*

Shopping centre entrance, outside. Black Duck and White Duck are vaping, this time abiding by the ten-metre rule, while NJ talks with them. Flyers litter the floor

WD Can you describe the individual?

NJ He was in a costume.

BD So? You can describe the costume, can't you?

NJ It was a chicken costume.

WD What breed?

NJ Sorry?

BD What breed of chicken? Leghorn? Legbar? Sussex? Silkie? Rhode Island Red?

NJ A brown one.

BD Ignoramus.

WD Probably a Leghorn.

BD Could be a Brahma.

WD Rhode Island Red.

BD Or a Sussex, or an Orpington, or a Marans.

WD Not really narrowing it down (*to* NJ) would help if you knew your chickens.

BD He's not interested in different cultures.

NJ I don't reckon many people dressed like chickens have passed through in the past ten minutes.

BD Wouldn't know if an Australorp came and pecked you on the arse.

NJ I know what a chicken looks like.

BD Be telling us his best friend's a chicken next.

WD (*to* NJ) Look, just because you've seen Chicken Run, or Chicken Little.

BD Foghorn Leghorn.

WD Or that chicken in Return to Oz.

BD Billina.

WD Or even if you fed some once at a farm.

BD Maybe you once had some tasty nuggets?

WD Doesn't mean you know chickens.

BD You know nothing about chickens.

WD What are you after him for anyway?

NJ Not quite sure.

BD You nothing about nothing.

NJ He was handing flyers in the centre without permission.

BD Is that it?

WD *(to BD)* Actually, we've got experience of how contentious the issue flyer-territory can be.

BD True *(to NJ)* cartoon chicken, was he?

NJ Pretty sure he was real.

BD You know being a wise guy doesn't cover your smartarse, can still see your ignorance from space.

NJ I'm pretty sure he wasn't here for work, your territories are secure.

WD What was he doing then?

NJ Political protest outside Clucking Hungry.

BD Right on.

WD Christ, not another one.

BD picks up one of the scattered flyers from the ground, getting excited as they read

BD You go, my Muslim brother!

WD Don't start.

BD No, *let's* start. Start an uprising /

WD Prefer roosting.

BD Start a revolution /

WD Comfortable enough, thanks.

BD Start showing a little solidarity.

BD holds out the flyer. WD reluctantly takes it

WD *(reading)* So he is competing for business.

NJ There's no such place as the Friendly Falafel.

NJ (*gleefully*) Then it's pure sabotage.

WD So what's his beef?

NJ Bacon, not beef. He claims they slipped a couple of rashers into his chicken burger.

WD Is that it?

BD Don't you start.

WD What's the big deal?

BD Might not be to you.

NJ That's not the whole story. His sister was attacked in the centre some time back for wearing a hijab.

WD Right.

BD Scumbags.

WD Did you manage to catch them?

NJ Couldn't I.D. him properly.

BD Not much better with humans then?

NJ Look, I just want to know if you've seen someone dressed in a chicken costume come through that door in the past ten minutes.

WD Ten minutes, you say?

NJ Give or take.

BD Through (*points*) that door, you say?

NJ Where the cameras lost sight of him.

WD Well we've been here at least fifteen minutes.

NJ Great.

BD So we should have seen him.

WD Through (*points*) that door there, you say?

NJ Where we last saw him.

BD See that's going to be a tricky one.

WD Not as simple as all that, that's for sure.

NJ But you were right here.

BD Yes, we were right here, not (*points*) there.

NJ The door's right there.

WD Yes, but not here.

BD The door's there, see?

NJ As clear as day.

WD But we're all the way over here.

BD Outside of the ten-metre perimeter.

WD Honouring the smoke-free zone.

BD Even though it's only vape.

WD It's just vape but we abide by the rules.

BD So you see, it's more difficult /

WD when you're outside the action /

BD to witness any comings and goings.

NJ The doors just (*points*) there.

BD But the further away you are /

WD the more easily distracted. Homeless asking for change /

BD boy racers doing donuts in the carpark /

WD Not really my cup of tea, but the sky really does open up when you step out
from under the shadow the centre.

NJ So you didn't see a giant chicken?

BD I mean, maybe /

WD maybe it was guinea fowl /

BD could have been a turkey /

WD or even a grouse.

BD Honestly, officer, it was hard to get a good look.

NJ I'm not an officer.

WD Forgive me and my friend, officer /

BD (to WD) Unfamiliar with that plumage /

WD don't know a lot about your breed.

NJ I get it, birds of feather and all that.

WD You do know ducks and chickens are different species?

BD But still, we're more like them than you.

NJ I'll try elsewhere, thanks for nothing.

BD That's ruffled him.

WD Certainly has (to NJ) try not to get in flap.

NJ Do you think of these slices of comedy gold while you're on these seemingly eternal breaks? You've clearly got the time to come up with these witty repartees. That and argue about work, but do you ever actually do any?

WD Did a show this morning, three families came up to congratulate me on my performance, couple of the kids even wanted an autograph.

BD And I'm still getting shot by the great white hunter (to WD) although the beak thing doesn't work quite so well since you, you know /

WD I thought we were going to let that lie?

BD My bad (to NJ) point is, we fulfil our job description.

WD While you're failing at yours.

BD Haven't you got a chicken to catch?

NJ *leaves*

WD Not much of a detective that one.

BD We did just send him on a wild goose chase.

WD *picks up a flyer from the floor*

WD He could have just followed the paper trail.

*

Shopping centre, toilets. A row of sinks in front of a mirror, each sink has an automatic soap dispenser. Voiceover recalls earlier events

NJ (V.O.) Sierra 15 to Control, do you copy? Over.

Kevin (V.O.) Go ahead Sierra 15, over.

NJ (V.O.) Just unlocking north corridor entrance now, someone outside propping the door up. Looks like we got another sleeper, over.

Kevin (V.O.) Copy. Too early in the morning for this, over. See if you can wake them, over.

NJ (V.O.) Hello?...Hello?...Anyone under there?...I think it's Albert.

Kevin (V.O.) Christ, thought we'd got rid of him.

NJ enters the toilets. He holds a black glove in one hand as he surveys the soap dispensers

NJ (V.O.) Albert? You're not meant to be here, remember?...Albert?...shit, shit...Kev, he's stone cold.

Sound of sirens. NJ puts on the black glove.

Paramedic (V.O.) Happens more than you think, I'm afraid.

NJ (V.O.) What killed him?

Musa (V.O.) Broken heart.

Paramedic (V.O.) Looks like he OD'd

NJ holds his gloved hand under the soap dispenser but nothing happens

Paramedic (V.O.) Found a meth pipe by the body.

NJ (V.O.) Amphetamine?

Paramedic (V.O.) Of sorts.

NJ (V.O.) So what happens, you know, when you OD on it?

Paramedic (V.O.) Initial examination suggests he doesn't look like a regular user.

Musa (V.O.) He was driven to it.

NJ tries another. Again, nothing

Paramedic (V.O.) So most likely an acute overdose. Breathing becomes more rapid, pulse increases, which with a large dose eventually leads to a stroke or heart attack. Either that, or hyperthermia.

NJ (V.O.) But it's summer, and he was well wrapped.

Paramedic (V.O.) Hyper not hypo, uncontrolled rise in body temperature. Also, kidney failure, but the first two are more likely in acute cases. Of course, could be combination of all of these. The autopsy will verify the cause.

Musa (V.O.) It's this place.

NJ tries another, same result

Paramedic (V.O.) And we mustn't rule out environmental factors.

Musa (V.O.) These people.

Paramedic (V.O.) But it looks like he was relatively fit and healthy.

Musa (V.O.) You can't diagnose a broken heart.

NJ tries all dispensers again but nothing

Paramedic (V.O.) You said you were in contact with the deceased recently?

NJ (V.O.) Just the past couple of days, at least I think it was couple of days.

Kevin (V.O.) I banned him weeks ago.

NJ (V.O.) Losing track of time. Ever noticed how there are no clocks in shopping centres?

Kevin (V.O.) Don't know where he's been since.

NJ (V.O.) And when you're inside, it's very difficult to see the outside world.

Paramedic (V.O.) Did you notice any unusual behaviour?

NJ (V.O.) They build them that way on purpose.

NJ takes off the black glove

Kevin (V.O.) He's always been a bit unusual.

NJ (V.O.) So you lose all sense of time and place.

NJ holds his own hand under the soap dispenser, it whirrs loudly as it ejects soap

Paramedic (V.O.) Anything out of the ordinary by his standards?

Kevin (V.O.) How do you mean?

Paramedic (V.O.) For example, was he more aggressive?

NJ tries another, same result

NJ (V.O.) He was calm.

Kevin (V.O.) He was a bit agitated.

NJ (V.O.) Even when we had him in the office.

NJ tries another, same result

Paramedic (V.O.) Any other signs?

Kevin (V.O.) How do you mean?

Paramedic (V.O.) Did he seem paranoid at all?

NJ stares at the pool of soap in his hand

Kevin (V.O.) Thought the world was out to get him.

Musa (V.O.) World's not built for people like me and Albert.

Kevin (V.O.) Kept ranting on about the machine.

NJ washes the soap off his hand, looking at his reflection in the mirror

Musa (V.O.) We can't be part of it.

Paramedic (V.O.) You mustn't blame yourself.

NJ's reflection starts to transform

Musa (V.O.) Can't just wash our hands of it either.

Paramedic (V.O.) There's nothing you could have done.

NJ's reflection changes into Musa

Musa So why should you get to?

NJ *flinches at the reflection. Musa's image fades. NJ looks at his hands, they are covered in blood*

*

NJ Wish I'd never taken this job
I remember simpler times
Like working at Spring Valley
chip packing factory
on the night shift with my mate Matty
We were paid
to survey
a conveyor belt of frozen French fries
picking out bad chips
is boring as shit
and by six-thirty
after struggling with the monotony
of an eight-hour lobotomy
we still have to run the gauntlet
and sign out with security

Pete appears on the monitors

Pete Alright lads

NJ Pete's the guard we meet
Piggy eyes sunken into a swollen face
that bypasses the place
where a neck should be
fusing directly with his enormous body

Pete Just done the nightshift?

NJ They say you shouldn't judge people by appearances
but their grievances

Pete Need a torch to see in there so many bloody Pakis

NJ Matty laughs
I laugh
Scared by Pete's appearance
we placate his grievance
inadvertently bestowing our allegiance
Just one problem

Pete Who've we got here then? Nak...Nak...

NJ Nakir

Pete Knacker?

Did you just make that up?
Cos it sounds like a load of bollocks to me

NJ Matty laughs
So did I
for allegiances sake
while silently something real inside of me began to break
Next day
much of the same

Pete I was a bit harsh on you yesterday.

NJ That's alright.

Pete It's just you don't look foreign.

NJ I'm not, I'm half /

Pete So what's the difference between an Afghan military base
and a Pakistani primary school?
Knacker?

NJ I don't know

Pete Neither do I
I just fly the drone.

NJ More laughing
more cracking on my insides
that the laughter hides
while the voices in my head
recall what others have said
You don't look like...you look white...so why put up a fight
Enough is enough though, right?

NJ Third morning light

Pete I don't see what's wrong with calling a Pakistani a Paki
It's the same as calling an Indian a Paki, an Afghan a Paki or an Iranian a Paki.

NJ Laughter from Matty
but not from me
Just fix those piggy eyes
sunken into that swollen face
which is the colour and consistency
of raspberry jelly
and I reckon I've judged him by his appearance correctly
Making jokes that just aren't funny
but I won't play
And with nothing more to say

he lets us on our way
Packing chips
on the night shift
Matty always gives us a lift
Should be in his car by now smoking spliff
but I feel this big meaty hand on my shoulder
It's Pete, the boulder.

Pete's face gradually morphs as he begins to look more like Kevin

Pete Can I have a word in the office?

NJ Maybe I went too far
don't think he liked the glare
wish I was in Scotty's car
smoking away the care
but Pete's shutting the door to his tiny office
and I'm squeezed up against his heaving mass thinking
Is this it?
Is this how I end?
Crushed to death by a bigot from the West Midlands?

Pete Ever thought about being a security guard?

NJ Didn't expect that
Why do you ask?

Pete Cos you look like you don't take no shit

NJ At the time
I thought I'd passed some kind of test
didn't register
that I was accepting a job from a racist

*

Shopping centre. NJ takes a statement from Pharmacist, his hands are cut and bruised

NJ Can you describe the individual?

Pharmacist He was Indian, or something like that.

NJ Did you deal with him directly?

Pharmacist As directly as possible, but had to keep my distance because he was a health hazard.

NJ Did he say anything?

Pharmacist Asked for plasters, though didn't need to. Clearly needed medical attention, dirty sod was dripping blood all over the floor.

NJ Did you get him the plasters?

Pharmacist Brought him a selection. We've got a good range; sensitive, fabric, waterproof. As well as different parts of the body, like H-shaped for knuckles. He needed butterfly for fingertips. Like, *all* of his fingertips. (*spots NJ's hands*) Look like you need some yourself.

NJ I'm fine.

Pharmacist You sure? Looks nasty.

NJ It's nothing. Did he buy the plasters?

Pharmacist We didn't have the ones he wanted.

NJ I thought you said you had ones for fingertips?

Pharmacist Yes, but they were the wrong shade.

NJ Wrong shade?

Pharmacist We only have them in pink, but he wanted brown ones to match the colour of his skin.

NJ Right.

Pharmacist It's only a new thing anyway, these different coloured plasters for different coloured skin. I remember the campaign, what a fuss. I mean if it protects the wound, who cares what colour plaster you put on?

NJ I suppose that's easy for you to say.

Pharmacist Like this positive discrimination when we're hiring new staff. I mean if they do their job, who cares what colour they are? (*NJ's hands*) Sure I can't get you anything?

NJ I'm Ok.

Pharmacist Needs a bit of cream that.

NJ So he didn't take the plasters?

Pharmacist Dripping all over the floor, dirty sod. And when we didn't have the plasters he wanted, that's when things started to escalate. He became more agitated, more animated. Ranting and throwing his hands about all over the place, droplets of blood flying everywhere, even got some on myself. Going to have to get tested now, dirty sod. Think he was one of those, you know, done to himself. My job

is to help people heal. I have no sympathy for those that do harm, to others or themselves. Life is sacred. It's the ultimate gift and it's the only one we've got. Why in the world would you want to risk that?

NJ Maybe he doesn't feel like he's in this world.

Pharmacist What a stupid thought. Course he's in this world, he was just stood right here.

NJ Do you know what direction he headed in?

Pharmacist Easy enough, just follow the trail (NJ's *hands*) You really need to dress that. We've got them in your shade.

*

NJ Something's got to give
something always does
Went to Turkey a few years back
Package deal lovely little place
Eat as much as you want
or can in my brother's case
poolside pranks while dad drank
Cheap imitations of branded liquor
swaying on wicker chairs as the sunset sets aside unnecessary cares
Daytime excursions arranged by the tourist board
and evening events
kebabs booze and belly dancing at a long table with the other tourist hoards
Dad starts doing this Iranian thing
Somewhere between a clap- and a click of the fingers
the Persian equivalent of keeping rhythm
Forever sociable and never one to hide
dad demonstrates to some Englishers next to us
while me and my brother die a small death inside
but this crowd ain't so tough and they seem entertained enough
Except one dick starts imitating dad's click-clapping
while yawping on like a sarky prick sitting
on his pasty arse and mocking
Oh this is hard isn't it
And isn't this amazing
taking the piss out of dad's clapping and the belly dancing
it didn't register then but it was clearly a racist thing

Like the sombreros in that Brighton bar

didn't register

Like the job offer from a racist security guard

didn't register

now they've got me following around a brown boy with a rucksack
Now dad has historically let this kind of thing pass
But this time he leans over to me and says
When this guy goes to the toilet
I'm going to follow him in there and stick this wine bottle up his ass
I wave him off with a laugh because he can't be serious
But next time I turn around he's gone
And so's the cheeky shit across from us
I panic but it's Ok the wine's still on the table
He didn't mean it about the bottle but that didn't mean he didn't mean it
Next thing we know this bloke's back
high pitched voice saying some maniac
has just launched and attack on him in the toilet
Apparently dad followed him in
turned him around while he was at the urinal and laid into him
It was dark in the dining hall so couldn't see so well
until all concerned parties were moved into the lobby to sort it out
then could see one whole side of this bloke's face all puffy and bleeding
I'd never seen dad do anything like that
Not to that extent
While the holiday rep tried to get to the bottom of the event
Mum delves into her pocket shoves some notes in my brother's hand
then sent us out to the bars to try and enjoy ourselves
This was towards the end of the holiday and me and brother had proper tanned
and we go a deep brown cos we were born on shifting sands
The twist was that the doormen wouldn't let us into any of the bars
They mistook us for locals who don't buy any drinks and harass the white girls
Next morning
we come down to dad's doing lengths in the pool
Mum sending him laser eyes from the sun lounger
He gets out to apologise for being such a fool

Monitors show the security office. NJ confronts Kevin, no audio

But giving a racist a slap is no error
he had nothing to apologise for
not as far as I was concerned
especially if a lesson's been learned
Turns out the bloke he beat up was a copper back home
His friends who were with him that night knew what he was like
so let him stand alone
Member of the police force and still didn't press charges
His guilt writ large

The discussion gets heated

Apparently he got the sack
When he got back home
the police started a crackdown
to purge racists from their line of work

If you wanted a job in the public services
in a school, hospital, fire or police station
You were forbidden to be a member
of an extremist organisation

Kevin goes for the door

But if you're a copper
Your skill set's fairly specialist
What else can you be
If you've been exposed as being a fascist?

NJ grabs his tie, it comes off

Well
that's easy

Kevin punches NJ in the face

Get yourself a job in security

*

Security office. NJ and Kevin

Kevin You don't understand.

NJ Try me.

Kevin The whole point of freedom is choice, we should be able to choose.

NJ I thought it was to be free?

Kevin Do you like everyone you meet?

NJ Not before I've given them a chance.

Kevin You're in the wrong job.

NJ I'm in the wrong system.

Kevin Steady on, Neo.

NJ I'm not the one who's taken the red pill.

Kevin The truth will set you free.

NJ Did you not report Musa's sister being attacked?

Kevin I like to keep things in house.

NJ Did you check Albert's claim about the soap dispensers?

Kevin That man smoked himself silly.

NJ Did you give me this job?

Kevin He's not the only one.

NJ Did you get beaten up by a brown fella in Turkey a few years back?

Kevin You're getting a little freaky there, Neo.

Kevin goes for the door. NJ grabs his tie, it comes off

NJ The N, is for nothing.

Kevin punches NJ in the face. Kevin goes for the door. NJ recovers and wraps the tie around Kevin's neck, choking him

*

Shopping centre roof. NJ and Musa

NJ See so clearly from up here.

Musa Still can't see a way forward.

NJ Can I join you?

Musa Don't try anything.

NJ Just want to have a look.

Musa I'm not coming down.

NJ Not asking you to.

Musa Can't go back down there.

NJ Don't think I can.

NJ joins Musa on the edge

Musa Not built for me that place.

NJ No clocks, can't see the outside world.

Musa And there's no way forward.

NJ Only way forward is down.

Musa Better than going back.

NJ We could just.

Musa What?
NJ We could just stand here for a bit.
Musa Nowhere else to go.
NJ And that sunset.
Musa It's not a bad view.
NJ Those colours.
NJ *holds out his hand. Musa takes it. They watch the sunset*

Paradaida (Paradise/Walled-Garden)

Origins of the Concept

For each of the plays, their origins are rooted in one of three spheres of human interaction; personal, interpersonal and socio-political.¹ In *Ostan*, the concept was sourced socio-politically; from newspaper articles, interactions I observed at the carwash, interviews with Kurdish workers. I was writing about a culture (Kurdish) that, although proximal to my Iranian heritage, was by no means the same. In *Off-White*, I called on my personal experiences; working as security guard over two decades, as well both the direct and indirect experiences of racism that I have experienced throughout my life. In *Paradaida*, the focus is interpersonal relationships; specifically, family. Like many Iranian families, after the revolution in 1979, we found ourselves flung to the four corners of the earth. We settled in the UK, while our closest relatives found themselves on mainland Europe. It is at this point that I would like to go into more detail. However, I must be careful, because this story deals with members of my family who have been through some of the worst experiences imaginable. It is no secret that after (as well as before) the revolution, the Iranian authorities would violently oppress dissent. People would go missing from their beds at night, never to be seen again.² One of my politically-active relatives was captured after the revolution and imprisoned for nearly nine months. His wife would have to go down to the prison every day, and watch through the chicken wire as the piled up the bodies of those they had recently executed. The authorities did not inform the relatives, they had to come down and find out for themselves. Every day she would have to go through this torture, while he went through his, inside the prison. He managed to escape and travel (by bus, bike, foot and camel) thousands of miles across Iran, regularly having to avoid or even confront the

¹ I became aware of these 'levels of relations' when studying for the MA in Birmingham, where Macbeth was used as an example. Breaking the play down into three parts (although it is 5 Acts, most of Shakespeare's plays also fit with the more contemporary notion of a 3-Act structure); the first is full of soliloquies as the Scottish king attempts to find conference in his own thoughts (personal), the second is notorious for the interjection and manipulation of Lady Macbeth (interpersonal), the third sees the king losing both his power and his mind as he believes the very trees of Birnam wood are advancing (in fact, it is the attacking army in camouflage) on him (socio-political).

² In *this Dead-End*, a poem written in the aftermath of the revolution, Ahmad Shamlou wrote "he who knocks on the door at night, has come to slay the light." There are several different translations, but personally, this is most poignant.

gendarmes, before finally crossing safely over the Pakistani border. Thankfully, we all managed to escape that nightmare, and a lot of us have managed to build relatively stable and successful lives in the West. One of my aunts in particular has been particularly successful, but such a past is difficult to escape. When we all get together, there is always laughter and love, but there is also conflict; usually about what to have for dinner, but also about where blame lies when it comes to the 'lost' revolution. Was it decades of Western (British first, then American) meddling that destabilised the country, or the years of internal corruption and tyranny? Of course, there is no simple answer to that question, and so the beat goes on. It is these questions, and the experiences of my father's family, that are at the foundations of *Paradaida*.

Social/Political/Historical Background

It is difficult to know how far back to go, but I believe the past hundred years has been extremely formative in creating the Iran we see today, as well as the tapestry of the story in *Paradaida*.³ When Reza Shah came to power in the 1920s, the almost one-hundred-and-fifty-year rule of the Qajar dynasty ended and the Pahlavi empire began. Initially, Reza Shah was seen as a strong leader, building infrastructure and creating opportunities in the country. However, by the 1930s, his popularity was fading and his despotism was rising. He was also seen to be cosying up with the Nazis in Germany, setting off alarm bells in London. When the second world war broke out, Churchill seized the opportunity to capitalise on the Shah's disrepute and, through various mechanisms, forced his abdication. Churchill was also involved in setting up Operation Ajax, which saw the democratically elected Prime Minister and national hero, Mohammed Mossadegh, overthrown in a British/American orchestrated coup. Many Iranians believe that the motives for this were rooted in Mossadegh's desire to nationalise the Iranian oil industry. This would have seen Britain lose a substantial chunk of their

³ The Iranian constitutional revolution in 1906 (almost 120 years ago) is seen as being instrumental in the formation of modern Iran, and was also the origins of Britain's control over Iranian oil production and revenue. The characters in *Paradaida* are of an age, whereby their experiences are formed by the rise of the Pahlavi empire in the 1920s, which is my reasoning for excluding any insight into the effects of the constitutional revolution.

claim of oil revenue in Iran, which they had been taking from the country for decades.⁴ Meanwhile, Shah Pahlavi was attempting to modernise Iran and build stronger links with the West. Unfortunately, his rule was marred with allegations of corruption and ineptitude, as well as becoming increasingly tyrannical towards political movements and splinter factions that opposed the monarchy and the government. Eventually, this came to head, and with continued interference from the C.I.A., the revolution broke out in the late 1970s. However, what transpired was not the revolution that the people were demanding. Instead, one dictator replaced another, and an outmoded and corrupt monarchy was replaced by a tyrannical and equally corrupt republic. After just fifty-four years, the Pahlavi dynasty was at an end. I was one-year and ten months old, and our family's story in the West was just about to begin.

Critical Connections

There are associations to be made between *Paradaida* and all three of the critical chapters. The play is set in large cliffside house on the south coast of England, and follows the life of Tala, an Iranian business woman who has made her fortune in the West. Her mother (Mandana) has come over from Iran on a long stay visit, and her sister (Zoya) is coming for dinner. Her mother has raised grave suspicions about Tala's newly employed gardener, Keyvan, an old Iranian man who Mandana believes is responsible for the disappearance of Zoya's husband, in the days after the revolution. Tala is a successful entrepreneur, a risen neo-subject who embraces the new economic world order. In this sense she reflects Omar and his relatives in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Asian immigrants who have become affluent in the new economic world order. Similarly, her neoliberal identity fails to supplant her Iranian heritage, despite her attempts to move on from the past (even burying her Iranian passport). The characters also have commonalities with those found in *Elmina's Kitchen*. Mandana is an old school Tehrani who scorns southern Iranians, while one of the reasons she does not trust Keyvan is because he claims to be from Tabriz, in the north of the Iran, which Mandana refutes

⁴ From the Iranian constitutional revolution (1906), Britain was instrumental in both the APOC (Anglo-Persian oil company) that evolved into the AIOC (Anglo-Iranian oil company), which for decades after saw the British taking 84% of Iranian oil revenue. J. Straw, *The English Job* (Biteback publishing, 2019) p.79, p.101

because “his skin is too dark.” She is both tribal and local, believing Tala is “traitor” for leaving Iran to come to England. Zoya, on the other hand, mocks the more traditional and religious members of Iranian society, that she had encounters with when she was back in the motherland. The three women cannot agree on anything that is universally ‘Iranian’, from food to politics, ruptures which echo the divisions *within* a racial/ethnic group that are portrayed in *Elmina’s Kitchen*. However, I feel the play draws the strongest parallels with *Chef*. *Ostan* and *Off-White* are male dominated worlds, as are *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Elmina’s Kitchen*, but *Chef* and *Paradaida* are female centric. Although the protagonists are at opposite ends of the neoliberal spectrum of success (Chef is in prison, Tala is in her mansion) they both deal with the effects of neoliberalism on women of colour in the 21st century. Chef is oppressed and mistreated by this patriarchal system, both before and during her incarceration, that places “efficiency and performance management” over a “duty of care”. Tala has found a way to integrate and, at least at the outset of the story, appears to be a neoliberal success story. Yet her choice of ‘individual financial success’ over ‘familial care’ comes back haunt her, as her mother takes revenge on Keyvan under Tala’s roof, and the lucrative life that she has built comes under serious threat.

The Evolving Work

As with *Ostan*, there is an expansive historical and political landscape that makes up the background of *Paradaida*. I attempted to outline some of this above, but this is only the tip of the iceberg (though ‘the tower above the oil well’ seems a more fitting metaphor). There is much more complexity to Iran’s recent history, complications which produce deep undercurrents for the Iranian people. Dramatising the ongoing fraught relationship between Iran and England, as with any condensation of a real and expansive geo-political situation into a fictionalised domestic setting, has been full of pitfalls. In the present draft of *Paradaida*, I possibly try and reveal too much of this history at the expense of the present action. Mandana is obsessed with the injustices of the past, due to both internal and external factors. She is a highly suspicious character, but also equally open, and often verbalises the details of these historic wrong-doings; whether that is Churchill’s intrusions, the Iranian monarchy’s destructive arrogance, or the Islamic republic’s ruthless fear-mongering. The debate about

where the blame lies is often direct, as I continue to try and make the impact of the past relevant in the dramatic present. There is a neighbour called Bob, who claims to work for border control but is actually connected with Interpol, and who introduced Keyvan to Tala to help out in the garden.⁵ However, through his access to the intelligence services, Bob knows about Keyvan's shady past all along. I was not comfortable to make this a play *only* about the tyranny of past Iranian regimes, as England's interventions over the years has been determinative in creating the Iran we see today. Therefore, the idea is that Bob catalysed the entire situation when he 'planted' Keyvan in this neighbouring Iranian household, in order to be able to keep an eye on him. At present, Bob's character does not fit the profile of an intelligence officer. He is somewhat bumbling, openly nosy and overfriendly. Of course, this could be a cover, but as Bob's character has evolved (he was initially just border control) over time, this 'masking' of his character was not my authorial intent. So, Bob's motives and manner need to be reconsidered. All of these bumps – balancing the amount of historical exposition, fine-tuning character intentions – have also had an effect on the storytelling. The result is that the first Act, the build-up to the core events of the drama, is far too long. Also, there are some issues with plotting, as characters often enter and regale us with everyday issues rather than alluding to the greater concerns they have about their present situation i.e. who is Keyvan? This is exemplified with Mandana's first entrance, whereby she speaks of number things (her ill-health, the size of the house, her mistrust of southern Iranians etc.) before even mentioning Keyvan. If he is who she thinks he is, he would be at the front of her mind and one of the first she would want to talk about with Tala, especially considering Zoya is visiting that day and will be able to confirm her suspicions. This could also add pace and create greater urgency in the unfolding of the drama. *Paradaida* has some minor, (and possibly a couple of major) issues that need further work, but it is an ambitious play with its roots and heart in my own family history, any continued consideration would be immensely worthwhile.

⁵ When this is revealed to Mandana, bearing in mind that she is already suspicious of Keyvan, she exclaims "Kar kareh Inglisse hast" which translates as "It's an English job". This phrase is well known in Iran, and alludes the many interferences by England in Iranian affairs over the years.

Paradaída
(Walled Garden)

By Arzhang Luke Pezhman

Characters

- Tala - Iranian, female
- Mandana - Iranian, female, Tala's mother
- Zoya - Iranian, female, Tala's younger sister
- Keyvan - Iranian, male, Tala's gardener
- Bob - English, male, Tala's neighbour

Setting

England. The south-east coast. Summer.

A large, rustic style kitchen; wooden table and chairs, aga cooker etc. alongside top brand accessories; chrome juicer, pod coffee machine, over-sized steel salt and pepper grinders etc.

On the wall hang a few pieces of contemporary Iranian art, among which is a framed photograph of three figures sitting at a table. The image is of William Churchill's 69th birthday in Tehran, 1943. Churchill is flanked by Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin, a large cake adorned with many candles sits in front of them.

The kitchen is an extension on the end of a large cliff-side house with doors that lead to the rest of the house and glass doors that lead onto a small patio area to the side, with tables and chairs. The kitchen/patio sits on the edge of a large garden that overlooks the sea.

Although the vlogs/presentations on preparing and cooking Iranian cuisine take place in Tala's kitchen, they should be presented as separate from main action of the play. The photograph of Churchill's birthday party should be more visible in these sections.

Preparation: Ghormeh Sabzi (Herb and Lamb Stew)

Tala

Salaam viewers. My name is Tala Kiyani and my passion is food. I'd like to take you on a journey through some of the finest, authentic Persian cuisine, prepared right here in my own home.

Today, I'm going to cook what some consider to be the Iranian national dish, *ghormeh sabzi*. *Ghormeh*, meaning "braised" or "roasted". *Sabzi* meaning "green" or in this case, herbs.

The secret to getting this right is in using fresh produce, which you can easily grow yourself during these Spring and Summer months, either in your back garden or in pots on your windowsill.

She begins taking out the herbs

You'll need flat leaf parsley, coriander and spring onion, but only the green, leafy part. The most important herb is the fenugreek. This can be hard to get hold of outside of warm climates, but I should insist that you use fresh or dried fenugreek leaves at worst. Finally, some spinach, just to bulk things out with all these beautiful aromatic herbs.

Take two good bunch of each of the herbs. For those of you who are new to my channel, there are no numbers in my recipes, just "cup fulls" and "half spoons", "pinches", "dashes" and "bunches". And for the meat, no weights, just body parts. In this case, shoulder of lamb.

She takes out a shoulder of lamb

Now, though nationally recognised, there is much dispute on the correct way to prepare this ancient dish. Indeed, among Iranians there is much dispute about anything and everything 'Iranian'. My advice, take compliments as gracefully as criticism, otherwise one of your guests might end up being part of the ingredients.

She chops the lamb shoulder

Morning

Tala sits at the kitchen table, flipping a packet of cigarettes over in her hands while the coffee machine gurgles in the background. She gets up to retrieve her drink and notices the photo of Churchill. She takes it down and sits it on the sideboard, facing the wall. She takes a cigarette out of the packet, but puts it away when she hears someone coming

Keyvan enters carrying a basket of rose petals and singing

Keyvan “How many kinds of sweet flowers grow, in an English country garden” Good morning, khanom. I hope I didn’t disturb you.

Tala Been awake since dawn chorus.

Keyvan Ah yes. Nature’s alarm clock.

Tala Between that and my bladder.

Keyvan The joys of getting old.

Tala There’s joy?

Keyvan Ups and downs, khanom. My memory is not what it was but then there’s plenty I’m happy to forget, so it’s not all bad. I have learned to relax, or, what is they say here? Go with the flow.

Tala I’m not quite ready to start wetting myself. And it always makes me tense when people tell me to relax.

Keyvan I wouldn’t dream of telling you anything, khanom. It was the great prophet that said ‘I know a word, the saying of which will cause him to relax. If he does say “I seek refuge with Allah from Satan” then all anger will /

Tala Keyvan.

Keyvan Khanom?

Tala What have I said about particular topics of conversation in this house?

Keyvan Yes, khanom.

Tala I have one rule.

Keyvan No religion, no politics. Yes, khanom. Though strictly speaking, that’s two. And my daughter tells me that everything is political these days.

The rose petals

Tala What happened to my roses?

Keyvan The Damasks in the south west corner didn’t make it, I’m afraid the whole bed has perished.

Tala They seemed to be struggling.

Keyvan Have those roses always been there?

Tala Had some Floribunda down there last year, wasn't too keen on them.

Keyvan That's understandable, no real scent to the Floribunda. Can I ask, when you planted the Damasks did you clear out the old soil?

Tala Honestly, I don't remember. I planted them well enough.

Keyvan You need to dig out a good half metre wide and deep for each plant. You must be very careful when planting new roses. They suffer from replant disease, which they catch when they try and root down in soil where other roses have been. They call it 'soil sickness'. If it isn't fresh soil, the roots don't grow properly and the plants die.

Keyvan produces a tatty looking passport

Keyvan I found this as I was clearing the Damasks.

Tala You know I'd forgotten clean about that.

Keyvan I assume that was the point in burying it.

Tala I wouldn't assume, Keyvan.

Keyvan Forgive me then, khanom, but why would you bury your passport?

Tala Iranian passport.

Keyvan You do have dual citizenship?

Tala On paper.

Keyvan But not in your heart. I understand, khanom. Like the Damasks, we need fresh soil for our roots to bed.

Tala Keyvan, you have the heart of a poet.

Keyvan Well I do like to read the great Sufi /

Tala Yet I clearly remember hiring a gardener.

Keyvan Yes, khanom.

Tala What about our little infestation problem?

Keyvan I haven't yet checked the traps.

Tala I don't know why you don't just use poison.

Keyvan Horrible stuff, causes internal bleeding, the brain swells. Or stops them drinking and they die of thirst. Very cruel, and for such intelligent creatures.

Tala Then maybe they should know better. If you insist on traps then it's down to you to get rid of them how you see fit. Far away from here, please.

Keyvan Yes, khanom. Leave it with me.

He lingers

Keyvan Have you had anymore thoughts about the garden?

Tala I've told you I like it as it is.

Keyvan No doubt it has a sparse beauty, but with such a grand canvas, I can't help think that it could do with more.

Tala I'm happy with my rose bushes.

Keyvan Then why not have some rambling rose across the northwest wall? You have to admit that brickwork is not attractive.

Tala That's Bob's wall. He claims the roots bury into the mortar, loosen the bricks.

Keyvan That's very unlikely, it's not aggressive like ivy.

Tala Tell him that.

Keyvan I'm not sure it's my place.

Tala He might listen to an expert.

Keyvan I often catch him peering at me over the hedgerow, I do wonder if he's trying to pick up some tricks.

Tala He's just plain nosey.

Keyvan Then maybe some delphiniums or hollyhock along the borders? Tall, majestic plants. Good for privacy.

Tala I like my rosebushes.

Keyvan I understand, for your *sharab*, delicious but...what about tree varieties?

Tala We have trees.

Keyvan Sure. Apple, plum, pear. You know, fruit trees aren't the most attractive.

Tala Depends what you do with the fruit.

Keyvan With your culinary expertise khanom, no doubt you can work wonders. However, taste is but one of the senses, and my concern is with the garden not the kitchen. What about silver birch? Slender and stunning, with its beautiful broken skin. The way that bark catches the light! Or the orange berries of the rowan, or the yellow burst of the acacia blossom. It would really compliment what's already here.

Tala So would a mighty oak but I don't want it stuck in the middle of my lawn.

Keyvan That would be ridiculous...a cypress tree, on the other hand. Our national tree, the tree of independence. Myth has it, that if you rub its dark green leaves on your eyes, you acquire unlimited confidence.

Tala There's a fine line between being confident and being pushy.

Keyvan At least consider extending your colour palette.

Tala The roses are colourful, and didn't I agree to trying out some violets?

Keyvan Roses and violets, red and purple. I suppose that's ok, if you want your garden to look like a giant bruise.

Tala Your creativity is clearly wasted here.

Keyvan Not at all, khanom. I'm very grateful.

Tala Beats working at the garden centre, I suppose.

Keyvan Not the most flattering of comparisons, most places would.

Tala Helped you learn your trade, surely?

Keyvan I learned everything I knew back in Iran.

Tala With such a different climate?

Keyvan I grew up in the north, Tabriz. It's not so different.

Tala You must have picked up a few new tricks over here?

Keyvan When it comes to innovative ideas, the English believe they have the greatest exports. Take democracy, their greatest since Oliver Cromwell. They've been 'exporting' their idea of democracy throughout the /

Tala Strike two.

Keyvan Baseball?

Tala Politics.

Keyvan *nods an apology*

Keyvan Did you ever visit Eram garden in Shiraz? I mean, when you were in Iran.

Tala Several times, though we had Chehel Sotoun right on our doorstep when I was growing up.

Keyvan You are Isfahani?

Tala Born, not bred.

Keyvan Chehel Sotoun is very beautiful, you should take inspiration from her.

Tala More water than garden.

Keyvan I'm not suggesting we start digging trenches, I'm simply suggesting a bit more variety. What do they say here? Variety is the spice of life. Horticulture is about more than exciting your tastebuds and filling your belly. You know the ancient word for garden in Persian is paradise. *Paradaida*, a garden surrounded by walls. The Achaemenids imagined the whole of Persia was a garden to be protected. They built walls in the north to stop the invading Huns and the Turkic tribes, and in the south to defend against the Bedouin Arabs.

Tala (*points*) To the south, the English-channel. To the north, well, Bob. And he's already got a wall.

Keyvan The garden should be a place of peace and tranquillity, a place for leisure and privacy /

Tala I don't have anything to hide.

Keyvan A place of spirituality, where you can be closer to god /

Tala And that's strike three.

Keyvan (*sighs*) And an early shower for me, as I believe they say.

He goes to leave

Tala I'm preparing ghormeh-sabzi, so I'm going to need some herbs.

Keyvan Flat leaf parsley, coriander, fenugreek and spring onions.

Tala And spinach.

Keyvan You're the boss.

Tala You disapprove?

Keyvan No, you want to keep it as bland as your garden so /

Tala I don't want there to be any excuses for complaint.

Keyvan You're expecting guests?

Tala My sister.

Keyvan Ah, is this Zoya I've heard so much about?

Tala I don't remember ever having spoken about her.

Keyvan Well, no, I heard you and your mother talking about her.

Tala You were eavesdropping?

Keyvan It was more shouting than talking.

Tala And what exactly did you hear?

Keyvan It's really none of my business.

Tala Bit late for that.

Keyvan It's between your family.

Tala You've been with us how long now, Keyvan? Almost two months? You're practically family.

Keyvan That's too kind.

Tala And you do enjoy working here?

Keyvan Of course.

Tala Well, then I insist.

Keyvan *shifts uneasily*

Keyvan If you insist...I believe you said she's religious.

Tala I said that?

Keyvan In her own way. You used the phrase "fair-weather Muslim".

Tala What else did you hear?

Keyvan That she's a political woman.

Tala What kind of politics?

Keyvan I believe you called her an "armchair Marxist."

Tala Who isn't these days?

Keyvan Like my daughter. At university her and her friends were always joining up with some cause or another. It's good to be political, though I find it is more a pursuit of the youth. 'If you're not a socialist when you're twenty you don't have a heart. If you're not a capitalist at forty, you don't have a head' as I believe they say.

Tala Now you see why I have my rule.

Keyvan You have a head, khanom.

Tala And you, a keen pair of ears. What else did you hear?

Keyvan I really don't think it's my place to /

Tala What else?

Keyvan That she has an issue with drugs. "Snorts cocaine faster than a dervish whirls" you said. If I could offer the advice of an old fool, khanom, don't tell Mandana things like that.

Tala We find honesty works best, no matter how brutal.

Keyvan True or not, it's not for a mother's ears.

Tala And neither was it for yours, but here we are. Anything else?

Keyvan That she's a mass of contradictions, has a terrible temper. Though your voices were quite raised, so it did feel a touch hypocritical.

Tala Don't you wear ear muffers when you're using the strimmer?

Keyvan Yes, khanom.

Tala I'm thinking maybe we need to make them a permanent part of your uniform.

Keyvan As you wish. I will very much miss the birdsong, but life is full of ups and downs.

Tala Keyvan, it was a joke.

Keyvan I see.

Tala I just don't have much of a sense of humour.

Keyvan You do yourself discredit, khanom. Ear muffers all the time (*mimes*) it's a good one. But you'll pardon me if I hold on to my laughter, as I feel it would be somewhat wasted now the moment passed.

Tala Good idea. Bank it, maybe you can cash it in later.

Keyvan smiles and goes. Tala takes the passport, puts it in a drawer. She takes out onions and begins to peel and chop them. Mandana comes into the kitchen, gets 3 pomegranates from the fruit bowl and sits. She eats them traditionally, gently crushing the fruit inside the skin, then piercing the surface and sucking out the juice.

Mandana My shit is black.

Tala Are you going to eat all of those?

Mandana That way I can remember how they taste

Tala You know we can get more whenever you want?

Mandana They don't grow on trees, not in this country at least.

Tala We've got Ocado instead.

Mandana Back home, they drop at your feet.

Tala Here, they drop it at the front door.

Mandana You never know when the shelves will be empty, or if the price is going to sky rocket. Bloody sanctions.

Tala No sanctions over here, mum.

Mandana You have to stock up while you can. They don't grow on trees, not in this country at least.

Tala No wonder you've got a bad stomach.

Mandana You think I'm homesick?

Tala You need to vary your diet.

Mandana 64 steps.

Tala Did you take your pills?

Mandana From that sorceress?

Tala Doctor.

Mandana She doesn't fool me, even with all those diplomas hanging on the wall.

Tala You mean the ones from Oxford? Or the ones from the Royal Society, crowning her top virologist in the country?

Mandana A crown doesn't make a king or a queen, it's what's underneath.

Tala I went out of my way to make sure she's Iranian.

Mandana She's Shirazi. Nothing but poets and winos, Sufis and dervishes. Wretched southerners. Not someone I want determining the state of my health. And she's a traitor.

Tala Don't start.

Mandana A traitor to her country. Do you know how desperately we need doctors? Never mind lawyers, teachers, scientists, businesswomen. Instead, you just get up and leave. Traitors.

Tala Loyalties for dogs.

Mandana Oh Dokhtar, I'm not talking about you of course, you always return. Not so much recently, but now you're retired you can come home more regularly, stay for longer.

Tala This is my home.

Mandana This is not a home, it's a house. A big, empty house.

Tala distract herself with food preparation

Mandana 64 steps.

Tala You need to take your pills.

Mandana What's the point, the walk alone will kill me. 64 steps from my room to here.

Tala You shuffle mum, they're not really steps.

Mandana This house is too big.

Tala Well you've got everything you need down there. Bed, sofa, television, en suite /

Mandana I've run out of soap.

Tala How many times do I have to fill that bottle?

Mandana I'd rather have a bar.

Tala They're unhygienic, all kinds of stuff get stuck to them.

Mandana Are you calling your mother dirty?

Tala Bars of soap went out with CDs.

Mandana I still listen to cassettes. Googoosh, Hayedeh, Farhad, never sounded better. (*producing the bottle, reading the label*) "Fine liquid hand soap". Fine? It's not that good.

Tala Not 'fine' good, 'fine' thin.

Mandana Pours out everywhere when I'm in the shower.

Tala You're meant to use the dispenser, not take the top off.

Mandana So it's fine as in 'thin' but not as in 'good'?

Tala Yes, no, it's very good. Bloody expensive.

Mandana Well I'd rather have a bar of soap, and less distance to walk. Your father used to say that people who get rich don't really like people. They get rich so they can buy big houses so that when guests come to stay, they can put them somewhere out of the way because they don't really like people.

Tala At least they have somewhere to stay, your guests used to sleep on the sofa. Mostly dad's 'comrades', drinking vodka all night, plotting a revolution that never came.

Mandana At least he never stopped looking.

Tala But he knew how to stay under the radar, learned how to keep himself out of trouble.

Mandana Only through the hardest of lessons.

Tala Which his commie mates constantly reminded us of constantly at his funeral. Honestly, all that wailing about "the glorious fallen" and the "righteous martyrs". The man died of kidney failure.

Mandana They weren't talking about him.

Tala I know that.

Mandana So why do you mock?

Tala I'm not mocking *him*. Dad put his family first, learned to leave the past behind.

Mandana But like the tail of a dog, it always follows.

Tala *gets up and looks out from the patio door for Keyvan in the garden, checking he's out of earshot*

Tala I told him we're Isfahanis, in case he asks.

Mandana Isfahanis? You made us southerners?!

Tala He was talking about Chehel Sotoun, thought it was a good opportunity to place us somewhere other than Tehran.

Mandana Good. That's good. But you couldn't have chosen somewhere other than Isfahan?

Tala It was either that, or Shiraz.

Mandana Isfahan is good.

Tala He knows she's coming for dinner.

Mandana You told him?

Tala He was going to find out soon enough.

Mandana So, he's been asking questions.

Tala Only of the landscaping variety.

Mandana Playing the gardener, camouflaging himself in the undergrowth.

Tala He overheard us talking about her.

Mandana Spying on us, like a snake in the grass, but I see him.

Tala Only Zoya ever actually saw him.

Mandana I recognise the voice.

Tala After a couple of brief phone conversations, some twenty years ago.

Mandana (*attempting to imitate*) "Khanom, this will go a lot more smoothly if you tell me where your daughter is."

Tala Doesn't even sound like him.

Mandana "Smooth is good, too many *ups and downs* could make life very difficult for you."

Tala You can't condemn him for one figure of speech. Did he say "variety is the spice of life" and "go with the flow" as well?

Mandana Go with the flow?

Tala He uses lots of phrases, he's a veritable fountain of cliches, sadly there's no law against that. And circumstantial evidence is not going to hold water with any judge in this country.

Mandana Hold water?

Tala Yes mum, another idiom, does that make a suspect?

Mandana I know his voice.

Tala Can you prove it?

Mandana No.

Tala Can you be absolutely positive?

Mandana No, but if Zoya confirms it /

Tala I'm not convinced her testimony has the surest footing either.

Mandana Why don't you just call her a liar?

Tala Because I'm not prepared to condemn someone that quickly.

Mandana She was condemned the minute you left her behind.

Tala We both had the opportunity to leave, you and dad made sure of that. I didn't condemn anyone.

Mandana I didn't say you condemned her, I said she was condemned the minute you /

Tala I heard what you said, it wasn't difficult to translate.

Mandana You must promise you'll never stop offering her sanctuary.

Tala But I'm rich mum, I don't really like people /

Mandana She's not people, she's family.

Tala They're all parasites to me. Family, friends, strangers /

Mandana Promise me.

Tala Vermin, as far as I'm concerned.

Mandana Dokhtar. Promise me this is somewhere she will always feel safe. Promise me.

Bob *(off)* Knock knock.

Bob *enters*

Bob Morning, morning *(sniffs)* something smells good. What's cooking?

Mandana A big bowl of let-yourself-in why don't you.

Bob Saw your bins at the top of the drive, thought I'd be the good neighbour and bring them down. Save you the walk.

Mandana You can save your saving. 64 steps, from my room to here.

Tala Don't mind her Bob, she's run out of soap and clearly got the itch.

Bob Got some Imperial Leather back at my place.

Tala Imperial Leather? Going back a bit.

Bob Me with it.

Mandana Is it a bar?

Bob Used to hate the stuff when I was a kid, mother scrubbing behind my ears. Now I can't wash without it.

Mandana Is it a bar?

Bob Got the range. Shampoo, conditioner, the wife loves the foam-burst body wash. Bit fancy for me. Pure luxury, she calls it. 'Luxury you can afford every day', like the advert says.

Tala Said, in the eighties.

Mandana Never heard of it. Is it a bar?

Bob The only one I use. And for hands, face, body and hair. Bit of a traditionalist you see.

Tala You're in good company.

Bob I'll bring some around for you later.

Tala That's very kind of you Bob.

Bob Meantime, if I could bother you for some of your delicious porridge?

Tala Ah, you're looking for my halim-e gandom?

Bob I'll leave the fancy names to you, I just know it as dee-li-ci-ous!

Tala *reheats some porridge*

Mandana (to Tala) You're killing him with your taarof.

Bob Ta-what?

Tala Iranian etiquette.

Mandana Iranian bullshit. When you take a taxi in Iran, at the end of the journey you ask the driver how much, they say "it's not an amount worth paying", but you still have to pay it.

Tala It's tradition.

Mandana It's bullshit.

Bob Sounds very sweet.

Mandana Sweets are for children.

Bob Well I was going to compliment your porridge Tala, but now I'm worried I'll come across as disingenuous.

Mandana You should never worry about things you can't change.

Tala I accept your compliment graciously, Bob.

Bob Doesn't cost anything, does it.

Tala But means a lot, so thank you.

Tala *eyeballs* Mandana as she serves Bob

Bob Good that you're keeping busy in retirement, Tala. Idle hands, and all that. Bit of a busman's holiday, though. Made your fortune in flavours, didn't you?

Tala Reaction flavours.

Bob Sounds sophisticated.

Tala About as sophisticated as a bag of crisps.

Bob Roast chicken is a personal favourite.

Tala Take a reducing sugar and an amino acid, mix them together, et voila, roast chicken.

Bob I'm sure it's more complicated than that.

Tala Difficult part is finding the market, then making it cheap.

Bob (to Mandana) She's a clever one, your daughter, and modest too.

Tala Always promised myself I'd get back to the real thing when I had the time.

Bob You can't beat good, old-fashioned home cooking.

Mandana Does your wife not cook?

Bob I'm afraid neither of us have any flair in the kitchen, so it's takeaways mostly. Chinese, Indian, even tried the new Jamaican restaurant in town. Quite the voyage of discovery, and it's a great chance to meet people from different backgrounds. I do find the culture of a country expresses itself best through food.

Mandana Explains why the English steal everyone else's.

Tala How's work, Bob?

Bob Challenging. Twenty-five new arrivals this morning alone, on a half-deflated dinghy made for eight. How they made it across is beyond me. None of them any documentation, of course, so the impossible task of processing them grinds to a halt before it's even begun.

Tala I don't envy you.

Bob I don't envy them, poor souls. Hard not to feel pity, at least for most of them.

Tala It takes a certain desperation.

Bob The odd rotten fish does slips through the net.

Tala That's why you're there to catch them.

Bob Slippery as they are. Difficult enough keeping tabs on the bad eggs in this country, never mind from abroad. That's why we have to work so closely with various crime agencies, the NCA, Interpol, just to keep track

Tala Well, we're grateful for your service, Bob. Keeping the country safe.

Bob back. Wish everyone shared your sentiment, some think we should throw the lot

Tala A disgruntled minority.

Bob Organised though. Protest party on the beach this morning, with their banners and megaphones. Even had swastikas carved in the sand, though they said it was nothing to do with them. Idiots don't even know what we fought for. My father was one of the lucky ones to escape Dunkirk beach. Gives me a certain empathy for those leaving French shores to escape war. And we do have our success stories, as you well know. How's Keyvan settling in?

Tala Good, he's (Mandana *glares at her*) he's a hard worker.

Bob I remember processing his claim. Found him a place to settle around here, got him a job at the garden centre, introduced him to you. That's what I love about the work, when you can see you're really building a community. And you can offer asylum to those who really need it. I mean, what kind of country persecutes a gardener?

Mandana Good question.

Bob Not that I'm a soft touch. Can't let any old Tom, Dick and Mohamed in. And for every protestor against, there are a hundred bleeding hearts for. What are they called again? Raindrops? Snowflakes! I remember when a few snowflakes on the tracks used to mean delayed trains, now dozens of them lie across the motorway to block traffic. Either that or they're tearing down statues, or defacing them. Even Churchill. Bloody protestors, people with no

sense of their own history. Like they've forgotten, if it wasn't for Churchill half the world would be speaking German now.

Mandana Instead we're speaking English.

Bob Is that so bad?

Mandana Just because Hitler was a shitbag, doesn't mean that Churchill wasn't.

Tala Language, mum.

Mandana English, Dokhtar, we've established that. *(to Bob)* Did you know Iran means Aryan?

Bob I didn't, but now I hear it.

Mandana My father used to support the Nazis.

Tala You always say that with such pride.

Mandana And why not? After decades of the Russians shitting on us from above and the English constantly crawling up our back passage.

Tala *(to Bob)* She means the Persian Gulf.

Mandana Your grandfather said the Germans would have been a welcome change.

Bob And was this his belief before or after they butchered millions?

Mandana Long before your time, pesar.

Tala Before all of our times, mum.

Mandana Before the English forced him into bankruptcy.

Tala Which has always been speculation.

Mandana Of course, speculation. You paint me as the paranoid one, while he could make you believe the sun was held up with strings.

Tala She's just stirring, Bob.

Bob Indeed, a natural born agitator.

Mandana Not born, made.

Mandana *gets up and retrieves the photo of Churchill's birthday party, she shows it to Bob*

Mandana You must recognise this?

Bob The man himself, good old Winnie, and is that...is that Stalin?

Mandana And Roosevelt. 1943. Churchill's 69th birthday, in Tehran.

Bob Well, what an honour.

Mandana Not one Iranian was invited. Imagine having your birthday banquet in Tehran and not inviting a single Iranian. Where's the honour in that?

Tala Alright /

Mandana Kicking the host out of their own party.

Tala You've made your / point

Mandana Not very Taarof.

Tala Mum.

Mandana How's the porridge, Bob?

Bob smiles, puts down the photo and continues eating

Bob So how long do we have the pleasure of your company, Mandana?

Mandana Not ready to be thrown back just yet.

Bob But you are on a limited visa?

Tala Three months.

Bob Must be difficult getting one.

Mandana Mostly down to British bureaucracy.

Bob At least you can leave freely, which is more than I can say for those poor British journalists in Iran.

Mandana You mean Iranian.

Bob British-Iranian.

Mandana With Iranian parents and born in Iran.

Bob Like your Tala, but a British citizen.

Mandana Dual nationality, but Iranian first and foremost. And who says they're journalists?

Bob *(smirks)* You don't really believe they're spies.

Mandana I don't think they're either, I think they're receipts.

Bob Receipts?

Mandana For years of sanctions.

Tala Ok /

Mandana For the tanks you bought but never paid for.

Tala Alright mum /

Mandana For the oil revenue, of which you / took 86% for decades.

Tala Enough now /

Mandana For Abadan.

Tala I said, enough.

Bob Well, it seems you can take the woman out of the revolution...

Bob finishes his porridge

Bob Who would have thought turkey porridge could be so divine, it must be like Christmas every morning in this house.

Mandana We don't celebrate Christmas.

Tala We do in this house.

Bob I'll pop over later with that soap for you, Mandana.

Mandana Take your time with your taarof, Bob.

Bob Tala, thanks for the hali...halim...the porridge. I'll let myself out.

Bob leaves. Tala puts the Churchill photograph back facing the wall

Mandana Taarof, my arse.

Tala How many times have I told you, I don't want this hanging on the wall.

Mandana Why not? A reminder of who has a seat at the table, and who doesn't.

Tala My table, mum. My wall. My house.

Mandana You didn't tell me he introduced you to Keyvan.

Tala I'd been talking about needing someone for the garden for some time.

Mandana Some coincidence. *Kar kareh Inglisse hast*, an *English job* if ever I saw one. I'm having flashbacks.

Tala Your life is one long flashback.

Mandana It's 1941 all over again.

Tala You weren't even born.

Mandana We *all* live in the shadow of 1941.

Tala Only because you keep dragging us back there.

Keyvan enters through the patio door, holding a basket of herbs in one hand and two rats in separate traps in the other.

Keyvan I'm afraid the fenugreek hasn't fared too well.

Tala It never does in this climate.

Keyvan I suppose we all struggle a bit.

Tala Not a bad crop though, thank you Keyvan.

Tala *takes the herb basket from him and begins to prepare, washing and chopping them*

Keyvan You're looking radiant this morning, khanom Mandana.

Mandana Radiant like the sun, or radiant like our enriched uranium program? Either way, it's a sign of decay.

Keyvan Not at all. It's a sign of your inner strength.

Mandana Tell my stomach that.

Keyvan Are you not feeling well?

Mandana Like the floor of a bazaar.

Keyvan That doesn't sound good.

Mandana My shit is black.

Keyvan Oh...really, you don't need to...I'm sure I don't need to know your...these are private affairs, khanom.

Mandana I don't have anything to hide.

Tala (*the rats*) I see your traps worked.

Keyvan Much better than poison, no need for such cruelty.

Mandana You've got clearly a soft spot.

Keyvan Aren't they beautiful? Incredibly misunderstood, highly intelligent creatures. Smarter than at least three of my cousins. When I was a boy back in Tabriz, I used to make mazes for them and hide dates in the middle. The rats would find them in no time. When I hid Gaz in the house for my cousins, they would spend all day looking for them. And they are hungry, my cousins (*gestures 'large'*) you know. (*the rats*) I call this one, Shah Pahlavi. And this one, Ayatollah Khomeini.

Tala A king and a holy man.

Mandana No wonder I can't tell them apart.

Keyvan But suitably more regal, khanom, and certainly closer to God.

Mandana Spreading disease like the 'good word' no doubt.

Keyvan You can't blame the good word, only those whose mouths it's been in. It was the prophet that once said that silence is better than /

Tala Keyvan?

Keyvan Yes, khanom, one rule.

Mandana (*the rats*) So which one are we going to execute first?

Keyvan Khanom Mandana! I don't believe you have it in you.

Mandana We've already discussed what I have in me, and it's not pleasant.

Keyvan It's not your heart that's black, khanom.

Mandana You'll know the shade of my heart when I choose to show it to you.

Tala Thank you for catching our unwelcome guests, Keyvan.

Keyvan All guests are unwelcome on some level, khanom. We understand that better than most, which is why we should treat these creatures with dignity and kindness. Like us, they've seen their fair share of ups and downs.

Mandana (*looks at Tala*) Make my skin crawl.

Keyvan Believe me, they are more afraid of you, than you are of them. Khanom Tala, do have an old cloth that I could use to cover the cages? It will help keep them calm.

Tala How are you going to get rid of them?

Keyvan I'm going to set them free.

Tala Won't they just come back?

Keyvan I'll do it on my way home. It's out of town, two bus journeys and a twenty-minute walk. Not to worry khanom, I live far from this paradise.

Tala Great (*pointed at Mandana*) I'll get one of the guest towels.

Tala *goes*

Keyvan I should really tend to those roses.

Mandana It's not like they're going anywhere. Come, sit with me a while, we have much to share. You said you're from Tabriz, beautiful part of the world.

Keyvan I like to remember it as such.

Mandana You still have family there?

Keyvan Long, long gone. My daughter, Ghazaleh, is now in the U.S.

He takes out his wallet and shows her a photo

Mandana Radiant.

Keyvan There's no need to be insincere, khanom.

Mandana I mean it. She's very pretty.

Keyvan And bright. Masters degree from Berkley, now working for a software company in Silicon Valley.

Mandana Iran's loss is America's gain.

Keyvan As Ghazaleh says, unfortunately when it comes to Iran, we have to leave to achieve. This is especially true if you're a woman.

Mandana Tch, Western propaganda. Aseyeh Hatami, Golrokh Bahri, Nazanin Daneshvar, Tabassam Latifi, to name a few. All set up very successful companies in Iran. All women.

Keyvan Your Tala left.

Mandana That was a different time. And she visits regularly.

Keyvan Forgive me khanom, it might not be my place, but I'm not sure she has any intention of returning.

Mandana It's not your place...but now you've inhabited it with your opinions, you might want to explain.

Keyvan Well, I found her Iranian Passport buried in the garden.

Mandana *(laughs)* Don't be ridiculous.

Keyvan Ridiculous, yes. I thought it was strange when I found it.

Mandana Buried in the garden?

Keyvan In the rose bed, strange indeed...but then I thought, some things are best left buried. Personally, I have no intention of returning to that godforsaken land.

Mandana *(angry)* You expats are all the same, the minute you've managed to pay or sweet talk your way through border control, you turn around and spit back across the line. And once you've reached minimum safe distance you think it's ok to drop bombs on the motherland, shitting on those who have chosen to stay.

Keyvan Forgive me, khanom, but I love my people. It's the country I'm not sure about.

Mandana Since the fanatics took control, as my brother Tamoures used to say. Rest his soul.

Keyvan With all due respect to your brother, khanom, the fanatics have always been in control. Whether royalty or religion.

Mandana We did have an alternative, once upon a time. A chance at social democracy.

Keyvan Prime Minister Mossadegh?

Mandana But the British and Americans took that from us too. Never forget Abadan.

Keyvan That whole Abadan affair was as mismanaged by Mossadegh as it was manipulated by the British. Mossadegh was an arrogant fool. He took sides with the Communists.

Mandana And what's wrong with that?

Keyvan The Tudeh party were murderers.

Mandana Be careful what you say, and in whose company.

Keyvan Forgive me, khanom, I have no interest in your political beliefs. All I am saying is that Mossadegh was unfit to rule. He would hold official meetings from his bed while still in his pyjamas.

Mandana Churchill did the same.

Keyvan Arrogant fools the both of them...but here I am, talking about forbidden subjects. If khanom Tala caught me /

Mandana No politics, no religion.

Keyvan Everyone needs their rules.

Mandana Just as everyone needs their rulers.

Keyvan True enough

Mandana Except you, apparently. You're not a monarchist, an Islamist or a democrat.

Keyvan I've been all three, let down by all three. You know I did the gardens for the Shah before the revolution, and then for the regime after.

Mandana Most with allegiances to the Shah were either exiled, executed or imprisoned.

Keyvan Thankfully, for me, there's not a lot of difference between a Persian Garden and an Islamic Garden. That's why I pledged *my* allegiance to the mighty Cypress tree, our tree of independence. And I make prayer for the scent of jasmine, lime peel, honeysuckle and orange blossom. There is a universal love for such things, don't you agree khanom?

Mandana All those sweet aromas make me feel a bit sick.

Keyvan (*flirtatiously*) Maybe that's because you're sweet enough.

Mandana *smiles and gets up, retrieving the photo of Churchill's birthday*

Mandana I remember our gardener always had sweets. He would tell me off for picking the flowers, put me to good use digging out weeds, and reward me at the end with a candy. This is long before the revolution and Mossadegh, soon after Reza Shah was abdicated, by (*photo*) you-know-who. I was watching the

English news the other day, everyone's talking about the colonies now. Countries waking up from the so-called independence they were granted, are now hungry for compensation, reparation, even retribution. But we were never a colony. Invasion, yes. Over and over and over again, but never colonised. Used as a 'neutral' zone by the allies in the second world war. Nothing neutral about having foreign soldiers patrol the streets of our towns and cities, taking over our homes, our incomes, violently crushing any signs of resistance. The English even stole the food from our mouths, emptying the stores to feed their troops. My father tried to help the community, unfortunately his heart was bigger than his wallet and he soon went bankrupt. Not that money mattered when the shortages began, starvation was rampant and people would give their right arm for handful of grain. We managed to survive on rice stores we had in the basement, but the maid and the gardener would not leave the house. There was no food anywhere, where could they go? We had to hide what little we had from them. One day I found the gardener eating an old hornet's nest he found in the wood piles at the bottom of the garden. having long run out of his supply of sweets. I felt sorry for him, but by now, even we had completely depleted our stock. Panic began to set in. We weren't yet famished but we had witnessed it. The stomach begins to eat itself so there is a complete loss of appetite, first for food, then for life itself. The maid sat on a chair in our living room and did not move for three days before finally breathing her last. We found the gardener head first in a hole in the flowerbeds. I remember thinking he must have been foraging for grubs or roots. My father had said the poor man was digging his own grave. Strange how we look for meaning in the actions of the most wretched, forgetting that their actions are as unhinged from meaning as their minds are from reality.

Mandana resumes eating her pomegranate

Keyvan Such a sad story. You clearly cared for this gardener.

Mandana We ate him.

Keyvan You...what?

Mandana Ate him, and the maid. Of course, I didn't know it at the time but looking back, one minute we considering insects for dinner, then it was steak every night.

Keyvan That's horrific.

Mandana Actually, it was pretty good. A bit like veal.

Keyvan But...you were just a child.

Mandana Hm, most kids loved sweets, but my tastes changed that day. Replaced with a different kind of hunger. So, you see, I'm far from being sweet enough.

Keyvan begins to mutter Dua (invocation) under his breath

Mandana Prayer? Really? No one needs morality when there isn't enough to eat.

Keyvan It must have been the most difficult decision for your mother and father.

Keyvan And the easiest. As you must know, Keyvan, a parent will do anything for the survival of their child.

Tala enters carrying a towel.

Mandana Ah, the veil for your rats. Or is it veal?

Tala It's a pillow case, Egyptian cotton.

Mandana Nothing but the best for our unwelcome guests.

Tala From a mismatched set, no big deal.

Mandana Maybe we could make up a bed for them while we're at it.

Tala You're sure they won't come back? Keyvan?

Keyvan *(distracted)* Khanom?

Mandana He seems to have swallowed his tongue, must have been hungry.

She slurps loudly on the pomegranate. Keyvan quickly takes the cloth and covers the cages

Keyvan Thank you, Tala khanom. And khanom Mandana, I wish your stomach a hasty recovery, Inshallah.

He takes the rats onto the patio and puts them on the table before hurrying off

Mandana Inshallah, my backside.

Tala What on earth did you say to him?

Mandana He tells me his family is from the north, Tabriz.

Tala So?

Mandana His skin is too dark for Tabriz.

Tala Why does it matter?

Mandana He's neither here nor there. You know he did the gardens for the Shah and the Ayatollah?

Tala So he adapted to survive

Mandana From one treachery to another.

Tala Dad did the same.

Mandana Don't you dare compare him to your father. He never pledged allegiance to either.

Tala No, but he quickly cut his ties with the Marxists when the regime turned on them. He wasn't going down the dead-end road uncle Tamoures did under the Shah. So if dad wasn't prepared to die for his beliefs, why would Keyvan for the sake of a few plants?

Mandana He's very attached, you'd think he wants to marry and fuck them by the way he talks. He's one of those, you know, like your Prince Charles. Prefers plants to people.

Tala Can you blame him?

Mandana Maybe you should marry and fuck him.

Mandana is upset

Tala I'm sorry I brought up uncle Tamoures like that, but Keyvan's sliding allegiances might not be a sign of anything suspect.

Mandana He showed me a picture of his darling daughter, if that's who she really was, then went on to criticise the regime, the monarchy, even Mossadegh! Sweet and sticky as treacle while slippery as mercury. Formless, shapeless, without sides. You remember what your father said about people with no ideology?

Tala Nothing exists outside of ideology.

Mandana So he's either a djinn, or a liar. I'll find him out. I'll make sure he reveals himself. He knows who he's dealing with now.

Tala Who's he dealing with? What did you say to him?

Mandana Nothing...we talked about the famine.

Tala You told him that horror story you used tell me and Zoya when we wouldn't go to bed?

Mandana Maybe.

Tala The one where you eat the maid?

Mandana No...not quite...I added a gardener.

Tala Jesus Christ, mum, do you think he believed you?

Mandana Did you see the way he scurried out of here?

Tala I thought you wanted the truth?

Mandana And I'll get it.

Tala With veiled threats and lies?

Mandana Sometimes the truth needs to be tricked out.

Tala Like not telling Zoya what today's really about?

Mandana I did that for your benefit.

Tala I wanted to tell her.

Mandana Of course you did, then you'd have every reason to disbelieve her. Dokhtar, we both know your sister has a flare for the dramatic. And there's nothing an actor needs more, than time to rehearse. I'm simply taking that away, so you'll know her reaction is genuine.

Tala I get texts at four in the morning, telling me she's going to do something stupid. Spend the next three hours frantically trying to call her, no answer. Call her friends, they can't get through. Then, sometime in the early afternoon, after I've worn a hole in the carpet, she replies "Oh sorry sis, yeah, I ate a litre tub of ice cream last night and just had to tell someone lol" or "I was going to get in touch with some-ex-or-other, needed you to talk me out of it, but then fell asleep anyway lol." And I know it's all bullshit but I keep up the façade "A litre of ice-cream?! Hope you're not feeling too *sick face emoji*" or "Not that-ex-or-another! I hope you didn't do anything you might regret lol". Emojis and lols when what I really want to say, in bold, underlined capital letters is "You *are* sick, my outrageous, fabulous sister. You are sick and I am here for you." Or "Exes come and go. I'm just glad you didn't do anything you *can't* regret. Because you, more than anyone, know the dead don't feel remorse. They only leave it behind."

Mandana You should tell her.

Tala She just shuts me down.

Mandana She's trying to bury it.

Tala How do you bury something like that?

Mandana It's easier for some than others.

Zoya *(off)* Salaam!

Zoya enters, she wears a colourful headscarf

Zoya Door was unlocked. Honestly, country folk are so trustworthy. Is it because they're all, you know *(sexual gesture)* related?

Tala And since when was that any indication of trust?

Zoya Right? I mean, I've got this sister, wouldn't even trust her to offer me a proper greeting. Come on, give us a squeeze.

Zoya greets Tala then Mandana

Mandana How was your trip, Dokhtar?

Zoya Train was quiet, but I swear Uber are getting worse. Bloke picked me up from the station complained about immigrants for the entire journey, then asks me to give him a good review.

Mandana Taarof bullshit.

Zoya Brown fella as well, think he'd know better.

Mandana I was just talking about taxi drivers. Wasn't I just talking about taxi drivers?

Tala (to Zoya) Almost like you'd never left.

Zoya I mean (*gestures to headscarf*) couldn't he see that I'm a sister?

Tala When it suits.

Zoya (*mocking*) "God is not an accessory that you can wear whenever you choose, you must be close to him at all times." You sound like a crazy mullah.

Tala I'm not the one with my head bandaged up.

Mandana Leave her alone, it's her choice.

Tala A man's choice is no choice at all, you used to say.

Zoya (to Mandana) Remember when we went into that restaurant? (to Tala) Some 'beard' comes up to mum (*imitating*) "Excuse me, madam, but do show some modesty." (*imitating* Mandana) "How about I modestly cut your throat?"

Mandana Beard? The boy was barely off his mother's breast! Thinks he can order me around. I'll wear what I want (to Zoya) don't do my voice.

Zoya I have memories of you in proper colourful headscarves, mum.

Mandana When I had to, *if* I had to, I'd choose my own design.

Tala The conversation you had with that neighbour, woman in black, proper sniffy (*imitating*) "A light coloured veil? Don't even talk about it! It may make my face look attractive and could be alluring!" (*imitating* Mandana) "Or you might look just as repellent, so why not give it a go?"

Mandana Don't do my voice!

Tala Which neighbour is this?

Zoya (*barbed*) You were long gone.

Mandana And I'll wear what I want.

Zoya Here, here.

Tala (to Zoya) You never wear it when you're in London.

Zoya No yokels to piss off there.

She removes her headscarf and scans the surfaces

- Zoya What's cooking? You're not doing ghormeh-sabzi are you? (*sniffs the herbs*)
Where did you get these?
- Tala Back garden.
- Zoya You can tell. I remember the citrusy aromas of coriander pouring in from the
garden, filling the house. Fenugreek smelt of maple syrup on hot days.
- Tala You quickly found out it didn't taste like it.
- Zoya I'd try anything once.
- Tala Often over and over again.
- Zoya (*the herbs*) These just don't have the same strength. Especially the fenugreek.
- Tala No tolerance for the cold.
- Mandana How anything can thrive in this weather, I don't know.
- Zoya And you're not chopping it finely enough for ghormeh sabzi, but you always
did like thick strands.
- Tala And you like your like mush. Might as well put it in a blender.
- Zoya No, just as fine as strands of hair. It's a stew, not a casserole.
- Tala It's chopped finely enough. It'll break down in the pan.
- Zoya The ancestors wouldn't approve.
- Tala Did they tell you that? It's chopped finely enough.
- Zoya Hey, it's your show. (*imitating*) "Hi, I'm Tala Kiyani, and today I'm going
massacre *ghormeh-sabzi* for you."
- Tala I don't sound like that...do I?
- Zoya You sound very professional. And it was a brave move taking on gaz-e-
esfahani, though why you added rose water I do not know.
- Tala I was going for Khansar style, remember I used to buy a block of it after
picking you up from school?
- Zoya You always took the bigger piece.
- Mandana She was the eldest.
- Zoya And I was the smallest, I needed my sustenance.
- Mandana And the eldest need their energy, to look after the smallest. It's tradition.
- Zoya Some traditions need to die. Like, no rosewater. Ever.

Tala What's wrong with rose water?

Zoya Nothing, if it's in a bottle of perfume. I'm not a total hater, I liked some of your tradition recipes. Been trying them out with the girls at work. They were particularly tickled by kabob-e donbalan.

Tala Ah yes, the lamb 'fries' kebab.

Mandana I don't know why they don't just call them testicles, that's what they are.

Tala Out of politeness, mum.

Mandana Politeness, my arse.

Zoya Course the girls read 'fries' as fast food, had to warn them that weren't actually any fries in the meal whatsoever.

Tala Did they still eat it?

Zoya Of course they did, after some initial squeamishness. For some of them, it was like sweet revenge.

Mandana And they call us savages.

Zoya You used to love kabob-e donbalan.

Tala Especially after a fight with dad.

Zoya Used to cook them up and eat them right in front of him. Chomp, chomp.

Mandana You're both very cruel, talking about your dead father like that.

Tala It was a joke mum, don't be so sensitive.

Mandana Me, sensitive?! (to Zoya) Did she tell what happened when she came back for your father's funeral last year? We went back to the village and the Nagshineh's wanted to honour your father, he did so much for those people, so they wanted to honour him in the *traditional* way by slaughtering a goat at your feet in front of the whole village. Your sister here agrees, but only if they can do it in the back garden, and to make sure they didn't get any on her shoes.

Zoya Prada?

Tala Gucci.

Mandana You've been in the West too long.

Zoya I wish I'd been there.

Mandana You were missed. People understood.

Zoya They could have sprayed blood on my shoes, fifteen quid from Primark.

Tala Well you will insist on keeping his name.

Zoya *(pointed)* It's all I've got left of him.

Tala A lifetime of looking over your shoulder? I'm not sure it's the kind of legacy he would have wanted / to leave behind.

Zoya How do you know what he wanted? You met him all of three times!

Mandana Please! Both of you! I don't think my stomach can take it. *(she gets up, holding her tummy)* Khoda! I need the toilet, again.

Zoya Still suffering mum?

Mandana Not that anyone cares.

Tala I've taken her to the doctors /

Mandana I don't want a poet and a wino trying to fix me.

Tala We got some tablets /

Mandana And now my shit is black.

Tala No, that's why we went in the first place, remember mum?

Mandana dismisses her as she shuffles back into the house

Zoya Her shit's black?

Tala Doctor thinks it's a stomach ulcer.

Zoya She needs to get that checked out properly.

Tala You think she's going to go into an English hospital?

Zoya What if it's something worse?

Tala I can't force her Zoya-jaan.

Zoya She needs medical attention.

Zoya goes into her bag and brings out a bag of cocaine

Tala Not exactly halal.

Zoya What can I say, Sufi's rule.

Tala Sunnis might have something to say about that.

Zoya I'll split it with you, but I'm having the bigger half.

Tala I'm too old to be shoving shit up my nose.

Zoya This is *not* shit. Really clean. Seriously, some of the finest I've ever had. Got it from a writer in Brixton. His poetry's crap, but this stuff is mana.

Tala Correlation, maybe?

Zoya *(taps her head)* Might soften some of those sharp edges.

Tala Says the woman with a head full of broken glass.

Zoya Might soften that tongue as well.

Tala Sorry, I didn't mean...I'll pass.

Zoya Suit yourself. You don't mind if I do?

Tala Would it matter?

Zoya does a couple of lines

Tala You Ok?

Zoya What? Yeah. No. Work's been exhausting. Nothing more messed up than a battered wife, other than a battered immigrant wife. And the cops are still using our service to track down 'illegals'. Most victims of DV are afraid to come forward for fear of retribution from their partners, family, even friends, so state support is often their only sanctuary. These women are afraid of retribution from their familiars *and* the government. So, their choice is stay home and get licks or come forward and get nicked, locked-up, even deported. Running from one type of violence or another is the only life they know. At least with me they get a chance to escape, to forget.

Tala What about you?

Zoya What about me?

Tala Do you get support?

Zoya We hear a lot of horrible stories and they've introduced counselling for secondary PTSD but, well, you know me sis. I'm a sponge for this shit.

Tala That's what worries me.

Zoya Could do with a holiday.

Tala Maybe a change in career?

Zoya Someone's got to do it.

Tala Doesn't have to be you.

Zoya Then who? You?

She takes out a vape pen

Tala Outside please.

Zoya It's not even real smoke.

Tala You know I'm trying to quit.

Zoya steps onto the patio to vape, notices Keyvan at the bottom of the garden

Zoya Who's that?

Tala Got myself a gardener, was getting a bit too much for me to handle.

Zoya No shit, the Blenheim palace landscapers would struggle with this lot (*about Keyvan*) He a 'rani?

Tala (*Farsi*) Hatman.

Zoya Funny how you can just tell. Where's he from?

Tala Tabriz.

Zoya His skin looks too dark for Tabriz.

Tala Never figured you one for profiling.

Zoya Just an observation (*squinting*) he looks like...(*she holds her stomach*) no...he does look familiar though.

Tala Like you say, funny how you can just tell.

Zoya clutches her stomach and winces

Tala You ok?

Zoya Just haven't eaten.

Tala That's the trouble with a powder diet.

Zoya It's hot. Is it hot? I feel hot.

Tala Take off a layer.

Zoya I'm shivering.

Tala Maybe you're coming down with something.

Zoya Maybe.

Tala Maybe you're just coming down.

Zoya Doesn't usually happen.

Tala You should lay off.

Zoya You lay off.

Tala Do want some water?

Zoya Please.

Zoya sits. Tala gets her water. Mandana enters

Mandana Typical, my bowel had lost interest by the time I got there (*to Zoya*) Dokhtar, are you alright.

Zoya Just haven't eaten.

Mandana Have a pomegranate, it'll keep you going until dinner.

Zoya Need some air.

Mandana Why don't you go and sit on the patio?

Zoya No...no, I'll, I'll go out the front. Just need some space.

Zoya leaves

Mandana She saw him?

Tala *nods*

Mandana Genuine enough reaction?

Tala Possibly enhanced.

Mandana It's written all over her face.

Tala Along with a whole range of other expressions.

Mandana This one I haven't seen for a long time.

Tala Blink and you'll miss it.

Mandana You should check on her, we don't know what state of mind she's in.

Tala I have a good idea.

Mandana You should check on her.

Tala Fine.

Tala goes. Mandana begins to look looks around the kitchen, finally retrieving a meat hammer. She puts it within arm's reach. She cries out, feigning distress. Keyvan enters

Keyvan Mandana khanom, what is it?

Mandana I saw a rat.

Keyvan Where khanom?

Mandana gestures to under the oven. Keyvan gets on his hands and knees to look. Mandana takes hold of the meat hammer

Keyvan It's unusual, you mostly see them in the garden.

Mandana They do seem to spend most of their time there.

Keyvan They're harmless enough, we used to chase them when I was a child back in Tabriz.

Mandana Your skin is too dark for Tabriz.

She raises the meat hammer over his head

Aperitif: Juicing the Pomegranate (*Ablambu*)

Tala

This is a pomegranate. In Iran it is considered the fruit of heaven. In fact, it was probably the real “apple” in the garden of Eden. Prophet Mohammad said “Eat the pomegranate, for it purges the system of envy and hatred.” I’m not sure about that, but it makes a great aperitif, with or without alcohol. Of course, you could always try eating it the traditional way, by *ablambu*-ing it.

Hold the pomegranate in both hands. Put one thumb over the other, then gently squeeze. The idea is to squeeze the seeds inside without bursting the skin. Gently, systematically, going around the whole pomegranate until the whole fruit is soft and squishy. Then press it into your mouth, bite into the skin, making a small hole with your teeth, while you suck with your mouth and gently squeeze with your hands. Continue working around the fruit, squeezing and sucking, until you have drunk all the juice. It is an art that you will perfect with practice, and once you know how, you will never again see a good-looking pomegranate without wanting to *ablambu* it! Remember, applying the correct amount of pressure is paramount, otherwise you’ll end up with a right mess on your hands.

Afternoon

Keyvan is still lying on the floor, though now his wrists and ankles are tied to a chair. Zoya sits, eyes fixed on him. Tala paces. Mandana is crushing a pomegranate, she stops and holds it up

Mandana What colour would you say that is?

Zoya Shouldn't we do something?

Mandana Not red, that's for sure.

Zoya Maybe check for breath or something?

Mandana Yellow, maybe. Possibly slightly orange.

Zoya We should check.

Mandana Definitely not red.

Zoya We should make sure.

Mandana Should be a deep red, this is not ripe.

Zoya What did you hit him with?

Mandana And see the blemishes?

Zoya His face is a funny colour.

Mandana It's been mistreated.

Zoya I think the blood might be pooling in his head?

Mandana Not good fruit here.

Zoya If he's dead we should do something.

Mandana (to Tala) You're giving me indigestion.

Tala takes the pomegranate and smashes it on the floor, stamping on it repeatedly until her frustration is spent. Mandana gets another one from the bowl

Mandana They don't grow on trees, you know? Not in this country anyway.

Tala You don't think anything can grow in this country.

Tala tries to get him up

Tala A little help?

Mandana What are you doing?

Tala This morning, I knew what I was doing. Ten minutes ago, I knew what I was doing. Right now, I'm winging it and I could do with a little help.

Zoya *helps*

Tala I think you're right, the blood's pooling in his head.

Mandana Let him drown in it.

Zoya His face is a funny colour.

Mandana (to Tala) I told you his skin was too dark for Tabriz.

Tala Will you shut up!

Mandana You treat him better than your own mother? And after what he did to you, Zoya?

Zoya I need to see his face.

The get him upright, though still unconscious. Zoya sits without taking her eyes from him.

Tala *checks him*

Tala Still breathing.

Mandana Of course he is, we want him alive. Zoya?

Tala He's going to need stitches.

Mandana We're not finished yet.

Tala Oh yes we are.

Mandana Zoya?

Zoya gets up and circles him. She smells him. She takes his hand in hers, strokes her palm on his, touches her fingertips to his. She comes back in close, face to face

Zoya I don't recognise him.

Tala I'm calling an ambulance.

Zoya But that smell...the touch.

Mandana And his voice.

Tala (to Zoya) You said you didn't recognise him.

Zoya I don't recognise his face.

Tala Then how can you be sure?

Zoya Tala, it's been twenty years. I've got blank dots the size of sunspots peppering my memory. Jesus, this guy's an old man! Of course I can't be sure, but while some things fade, others echo and amplify. I'm getting that loud sound, the closer I get to him, the more it resonates.

Keyvan moans, starting to come around

Tala So now what?

Mandana Just a few questions, that's all.

Tala And then?

Mandana Usually what follows are a few answers.

Tala And a lengthy jail sentence.

Mandana He'll get his justice.

Tala I meant for us...Zoya?

Zoya A few questions.

Tala Fine. A few questions. I'll do the asking. Mum, mouth shut, hands to yourself. Any other way, I call the authorities. Clear?

Mandana *nods. Tala approaches him*

Keyvan (*groggy*) Did we get him? I had him trapped but he escaped. Did we get him?

Zoya (*whispers*) What's he talking about?

Keyvan It was the Shah, or it could have been the Ayatollah. Clever little creatures, the pair of them.

Tala Some rats he caught earlier.

Keyvan Both exiled you know, but only one of them came back for good.

Tala Keyvan? Can you hear me?

Keyvan Must have been the Ayatollah.

Tala Keyvan? Do you know who I am?

Keyvan Khanom Tala? Did we get him?

Tala We got both of them. They're safe.

Keyvan Highly misunderstood creatures.

Tala How are feeling?

Keyvan Ups and downs, khanom, ups and downs.

Mandana *looks at Zoya but Zoya does not react*

Tala Do you know where you are?

Keyvan (*sings*) "How many kinds of sweet flowers grow, in an English country garden." (*licks the blood from his lips*) Why do I taste metal?...Why am I tied?...Khanom Tala? Khanom Mandana? What's going on?

Tala Keyvan, I need to ask you some questions.

Keyvan Why am I tied?
Tala It's safer this way.
Keyvan Let me go.
Tala You need to answer my questions.
Keyvan This is outrageous.
Tala You just need to answer a few questions.
Keyvan You can't do this.
Tala Just a few questions.
Keyvan Let me go, pedar-sukh-te! Let me go!
Tala This isn't going to work.

Keyvan begins to yell. Mandana gets up and slaps him. He is shocked but yells again. Mandana slaps him several times, hard. He stops yelling. Mandana indicates for Tala to continue, then goes and sits back down, on her hands

Tala I need to ask you some questions, Keyvan. Do you understand?
Keyvan *nods*
Tala What's your favourite flower?
Keyvan Khanom?
Tala Do you not understand the question?
Keyvan You tied me up to ask me about flowers?
Tala Do you understand the question?
Keyvan Of course, I...do you mean here or in Iran?
Tala Both.
Keyvan Well, then, I think it would have to be the rose. For both.
Tala You're not saying that just to please me?
Keyvan Forgive me, khanom, but I'd say anything to please you right now. Under normal circumstances if someone asked me what my favourite flower was, then I would tell them that I'm not six anymore. Like favourite colours, or foods, you grow out of them, you start appreciate a broader pallet.
Tala Then why didn't you say that?
Keyvan Because although I'm not a child, you appear to be treating me like one.
Tala Have you always been a gardener?

Keyvan I've always done gardening.

Tala That's not what I asked. By profession, have you always been a gardener?

Keyvan No.

Tala What did you do before?

Keyvan Odd jobs. Warehouse. And benefits.

Tala What were you back in Iran?

Keyvan Engineer.

Mandana Every second man in Iran is an engineer.

Tala Chemical? Electrical? Mechanical?

Keyvan Mechanical.

Tala What was your specialism?

Keyvan Refrigeration, air conditioning units.

Mandana And you say you're not from the south?

Keyvan Forgive me khanom, but even Siberians need a fridge.

Tala Why didn't you continue once you got to the UK?

Keyvan There's a huge knowledge and skills gap between countries, different priorities between the cultures, take renewable energy for example /

Mandana He's talking rubbish.

Tala Non-transferrable skills and qualifications is quite common. (to Keyvan) Why did you lie to us about being a gardener?

Keyvan Would you have hired me as a gardener if I told you I was an engineer? I wanted you to think I was experienced. You don't know how hard it is to have worked your whole life to build a skill set, only to find it's worthless once you cross a border. When I came here, I got a job in a garden centre. I learned a lot of things. I had to craft a new trade.

Mandana All these different trades, I imagine you're very skilled by now.

Keyvan Enough to get me by.

Mandana Where did you learn your skills in brutality?

Keyvan Where did you learn yours?

Mandana Have you ever been a member of the Savak?

Keyvan What? No!

Mandana Have you ever been a member of the Basij?

Keyvan I was neither a spook for the Shah, or a thug for the regime.

Tala Which engineering companies did you work for?

Keyvan Several. Homa Hotel group, Iran Air, Machine Sazi Arak, National Iranian Oil company /

Tala You said you specialised in refrigeration, air-conditioning?

Keyvan I was on contract at Iranian Oil. I maintained the units in the offices.

Tala Contracted?

Keyvan I worked for myself, whenever possible. The concept of a free market is somewhat stalled over there, as you are aware, khanom.

Tala So, you know more about internal wiring than you do about root systems.

Keyvan I'm a quick learner. I've had to be. Though still no wiser about why you have me tied to chair.

Tala Did you come here on your own?

Keyvan *nods*

Tala And your family?

Keyvan What of them?

Tala Well, do you have any?

Keyvan *nods*

Tala And where are they?

Keyvan You want their postcode?

Tala Did you leave them behind?

Keyvan *does not respond*

Tala You need to answer me, Keyvan.

Keyvan *does not respond*

Mandana He claims he has a daughter.

Tala Where are your family?

Keyvan Forgive me, khanom. Or don't, but I won't answer that.

Tala You see, Keyvan, my family have a problem. My family are sitting right in front of you. My family are exposed. You know *exactly* where they are. I'm just asking you to level up the playing field.

Keyvan (*bindings*) You call this level?

Tala If you answer the question maybe we can sort out this misunderstanding.

Keyvan What misunderstanding?!

Mandana You misunderstanding that we're asking the questions!

Keyvan My wife is dead. That is why I came to the UK. There was nothing left for me there.

Tala And you have daughter. Just one? No sons?

Keyvan *nods*

Tala And where is she now?

Keyvan Who are you people?

Tala Where is she?

Keyvan *does not respond*

Tala Brothers? Sisters?

Keyvan (*nods*) Iran. And scattered to the four corners. Like the rest of us.

Tala And your name is Keyvan?

Keyvan Of course.

Tala You've not been known by any other name?

Keyvan Nicknames? Insults? Plenty.

Tala And your family name? Alborzi? That's what's on the contract. That's what you signed.

Keyvan Sure.

Tala So it is Alborzi?

Keyvan No.

Tala Why would you lie about that?

Keyvan My daughter carries our true family name.

Tala You say your family is from Tabriz.

Keyvan Tabriz is where I grew up.

Mandana Your skin is too dark for Tabriz.

Keyvan My family are from all over. As you know, khanom, we are a nation of nomads.

Mandana What tribes?

Keyvan My parents were Mazandarani. My grandparents, I believe, were Za'faranlu.

Mandana Khorasan province?

Keyvan I believe.

Mandana North or south?

Keyvan I'm not sure.

Mandana You're not sure?

Tala Enough, mum. We don't need to go back that far (*to Zoya*) Are you up to this?

Zoya nods

Tala Floor's yours.

Zoya Just me and him.

Tala Zoya?

Zoya Leave us.

Tala You're sure?

Zoya I'll be fine.

Mandana (*to Tala*) *Ablambu.*

Tala (*to Zoya*) We'll be right next door.

They go

Zoya Do you recognise me?

Keyvan You look a little like your sister.

Zoya It was winter 1999, Tehran, you came knocking at my door.

Keyvan I wasn't in Tehran in 1999.

Zoya You were looking for my husband, he had just escaped from Evin prison.

Keyvan I wasn't in Tehran in 1999.

Zoya You showed me a card that proved you were part of the komiteh for the local area. You showed me your card and you invited yourself in. You asked if I knew that my husband had left the country. Do you remember what I said to you?

Keyvan I don't remember any of this, khanom.

Zoya I told you that I didn't know where he was and that I was seeking divorce. You told me it made no difference, the government won't accept that. That if he had escaped the country then I am part of the crime. That I will go to prison. I wanted to insist, but I knew you wouldn't believe me. So instead I asked you, what can I do? Do you remember what you said?

Keyvan Of course not because I didn't say anything because it wasn't me.

Zoya You said you'll go and investigate. I knew that my husband had escaped but he'd kept his whereabouts hidden, even from me, for this very reason.

Keyvan Exactly why I don't tell you people about my daughter.

Zoya My brother-in-law had recently been released from prison. I called him and told him what had happened. He came around with a cousin. They said if he comes again, call us, and we'll take him into the basement and deal with him. "We just want to taste his blood". They acted like they were joking. To cover their rage. So as not to upset me further. But maybe I wanted to taste blood as well.

Keyvan Khanom, please /

Zoya Shut up. You rang two days later from the office. You were very familiar "Hi, can't you remember me? I've been to your house. Haven't you missed me?" I was starting to get used to the game, so I answered courteously. Where would you like to meet? Would you like to come to my house to discuss the situation? How about tomorrow? You agreed, and when tomorrow came so did the men.

Zoya stops. She pours herself a glass of water and drinks it all, keeping her eyes on Keyvan the whole time.

Zoya Thirsty.

She pours another glass and sips at it

Zoya Of course you didn't turn up. You rang the next day, made some excuse about you having a sensitive job, that you didn't want to upset those who were higher than you in the regime. You asked me if I had a car. I told you I did. You gave me an address. Out of the city. Some abandoned farm. You told me to go and park there until you came. I rang my sister, Mariam, and I asked her what I should do. I either do as you say or lose everything. She told me not go, that if I did, I would never return. You contacted me soon after "Why didn't you turn up for our date?" What did you have planned? Candles? Dinner?

Keyvan I had nothing planned khanom, because it wasn't me.

Zoya We arranged another 'meeting' but now I was playing for time. We had an uncle, a lawyer. He went berserk when he found out, but he was clever a

man. No talk of drinking hot blood. He knew the game. He advised me what to say. That I've not committed any crime, I'm not involved in any political activity, and that if you have any issue then you will have to go through the legal process because I have done nothing wrong. You responded with a threat "You know what will happen to you? Are you still adamant about what you said?" I told you I was. You never rang again.

Keyvan Is that it? Forgive me, khanom, but this man you describe, these events, am I right in understanding that nothing actually came of it?

Zoya finishes her water

Zoya My husband was arrested in August, 1999. He was charged with being a communist and an infidel for his editorial involvement in a reformist paper. He escaped in November. He went to his brother's place in Ahwaz. He sold his land, borrowed some money, and made plans to meet me here in the UK. I would fly out first, he would travel south-east with the aim of crossing the Pakistani border and travel to Karachi, where he would take a plane to Europe. To me. He left Ahwaz in autumn.

Zoya fights back tears

Zoya I have *hunted* but the closest I've come is hearing of a bus being stopped just outside of Zahedan. A group of gendarmes got on, took five people off. Two couples and one other, lone male. The two couples made it, settling in Germany, Sweden. I tracked them down and that fifth person fits the description of my husband. That's the last time he was seen, just outside Zahedan. He'd travelled thousands of miles across Iran and was just 20 kilometres from the border. An arm's length. A fingertip. So close I could have reached out and taken his hand. He should be here with me now, instead I have you.

Keyvan I am not the man you are looking for.

Zoya Before my husband escaped, I lived every day in fear. They would torture and kill those accused of political crimes, but wouldn't tell their relatives. Instead, every morning, they would lay the bodies in a line in the prison courtyard, and family members would have to come down to identify their loved ones. Rows of faces pressed up against the chicken wire, the screaming and wailing as someone recognised their husband, or father, or brother. There was no escape, you had to look so very closely, scouring each contorted face for something familiar. Every morning, for eight months, I went down to that wire fence to look for my husband. Every morning I looked at those faces, and every night when I closed my eyes, they looked right back at me. I'd try and think of something else but, what if I missed him? So, I spent months replaying those images, then decades burying them. All those faces, in some mass grave in my memory. Yours along with it.

Keyvan So...you don't recognise me?

She brings her face close to his

Zoya The smell, maybe. Voice, possibly. The face, no.

Keyvan Then please, khanom, put a stop to this madness.

Zoya But then I don't even remember my husband's face. Buried, along with the rest.

She straddles him

Keyvan What are you doing?

Zoya And maybe you don't remember my face.

Keyvan I have not laid eyes on you before today.

Zoya Maybe my face is just one of countless women to you.

She begins to seduce him

Zoya What were you planning to do to me at your little abandoned farmhouse? How many other women would we find there? Or what's left of them.

Keyvan Please khanom, you just said you don't recognise /

Zoya If I give you what you want now, will you tell me where I can find my husband?

Keyvan How can I tell you where he is when /

Zoya Close your eyes. Close them. Now imagine yourself at your little abandoned farm. Remember you said how safe it was? And private too. Surrounded by walls, you said. Your little paradise. Imagine you're back there, in your little *paradaida*.

She begins to choke him

Zoya Where is he? What have they done with him? Where did they bury him? Did they even bury him or is he in some hole in the desert? If you don't know where he is, then tell me who knows. I want him back. I want to see him, to know he's gone. I want to hold his bones in my arms and tell him goodbye. I don't even remember his face. I want to say goodbye. I want to remember his face. I need to remember his face. Show him to me. Show me where he is.

The commotion brings Tala and Mandana in. Tala prises Zoya off Keyvan

Zoya I can't remember his face.

Tala Zoya.

Zoya Buried in some hole.

Tala Zoya.

Zoya I don't remember his face.

Tala Zoya, look at me.

Zoya Tala? I...I don't know his face. I don't know his face.

Tala (to Mandana) We're done. This is done. Understand?

Mandana *nods.* Tala *takes Zoya into the house*

Mandana Poor girl. So very damaged. Forgive her, Keyvan, agha.

Keyvan I understand, khanom Mandana.

Mandana You do?

Keyvan We all have lost so much.

Mandana Yes.

Keyvan Some of us, even our minds.

Mandana Too much for the brain to cope with.

Keyvan Yes.

Mandana You do understand.

Keyvan More than you'll know.

Mandana More than we will know.

Keyvan A loss so deep we can never find the bottom of it.

Mandana A dark place.

Keyvan A place no light can reach.

Mandana Where secrets can hide.

Keyvan Where the truth lies buried.

Mandana Beyond our knowing.

Keyvan I understand, khanom Mandana.

Mandana More than we'll know, Keyvan.

Keyvan Grief has driven Zoya to madness /

Mandana A place dark and buried.

Keyvan But I forgive her.

Mandana Dark and buried.

Keyvan Now if you could just untie me /

Mandana Dark and buried (*springs up*) we're going to need a torch and a spade.

Mandana *goes outside and comes back with the caged rats*

Mandana (*holding them up*) One torch and one spade, to help dig and shine a light. Metaphorically speaking, of course. Now which one's the Ayatollah again? Is it this one with the tiny ears, who can't hear his people? Or is it this one with the small, black, greedy eyes, who steals from his people? No, that's the Shah. Or is it the other way around? It's so hard to tell the difference between the two. Just as it's hard to tell the difference between the gardener and the gadfly.

Keyvan I thought we'd resolved this?

Mandana Not until we can tell the difference, but with one claiming to be the other, how is that going to be possible? The simple fact is, it isn't...unless...we kill one of them.

Keyvan Then he will take his identity to the grave.

Mandana Ah, but I bet the one left alive squeals.

Mandana *opens one of the cages*

Mandana Come on little rat, freedom is yours.

The rat tentatively emerges from the cage. Mandana batters it with the meat hammer until it stops moving. She then speaks directly to the other rat

Mandana Well? Which one are you, eh? See what happened to your counterpart? You're next, so time to confess.

Keyvan (*to himself*) No one in this family is well.

Mandana You're right. What am I doing speaking to rat?

Mandana *opens the cage, shakes the other rat out and batters it with the meat hammer*

Keyvan Now you'll never know.

Mandana You could have just told me, you could have saved them.

Keyvan I am not playing your silly game.

Mandana Good, time to get serious.

Keyvan I have been beaten, held against my will, molested...I won't be intimidated anymore.

Mandana I have no intention of intimidating you.

Keyvan You're forcing a confession.

Mandana I'm no longer interested in your confession.

Keyvan Then what? Are you going to eat me?

Mandana *(laughs)* A bedtime story I used to tell the children. I'm not going to eat you.

Keyvan So you're not a complete savage.

Mandana Of course not. I'm going to let Zoya eat you.

She begins examining kitchen knives and other utensils

Keyvan *(panicked)* But...I'm not...she didn't even recognise me.

Mandana When you lose someone to old age, or illness, or an accident, the heartbreak is unbearable because you know you'll never see them again, or talk to them, fight with them, laugh with them, love with them. But at least you know why, you know how, you know when, you know where. When a person is disappeared, you know none of these things. You know they've been tortured. You've heard the stories of the lucky few to escape so you can be sure of that. And you know they're dead but you never get to bury them, so the mind plays tricks. Keeps them alive, imagines them in endless cycle of torture, going round and round until it buckles the brain. Until you don't even recognise your own reflection, never mind anyone else's.

Keyvan How can I defend myself against the haunted?

Mandana You can't, they walk with the wayward. You can't trust anything they say because you never know whether it is their voice, or the dead speaking through them. And all the dead want is revenge. What you can do, is listen to their ghosts. My brother was a member of the Communist party, a fierce activist, journalist and scholar. If the Shah shut down one paper, he would simply start writing for another. Or he and his comrades would start up a new publication. His tenacity was his downfall and the Savak, eventually arrested him. Vanished him. That was over fifty years ago. I'll never find the final resting place of my brother. A change of regime means his blood has long since passed under the bridge. But Zoya's husband vanished under the Ayatollah, records must still exist.

Mandana takes the secateurs from Keyvan's basket, snapping them shut a couple o times

Keyvan Scare someone enough, they'll tell you anything.

Mandana I know my brother would have been scared, lying on that slab, while they did unspeakable things to him. But he was a good man. Foolish, ideological, but good to his core. Never surrendered, never gave them any names, right up to his last breath.

Keyvan Whatever you want me to confess, I'll confess.

Mandana He believed in humanity.

Keyvan I have done nothing to your family.

Mandana He believed in reason and argument.

Keyvan Then I beg you, listen to your brother's voice.

Mandana He also believed in non-violence.

Keyvan As do I.

Mandana Do you know what I believe? Nothing lasts forever. Now I don't know if you were directly involved with my brother, or if it was you that knocked on Zoya's door, or if you know where her husband's remains are /

Keyvan Zoya is confused, lost, like so many of the younger generation. They don't understand, they haven't lived through what we've lived through. They don't see what Western interference and internal oppression has done to us.

Mandana I'm tired, Keyvan. Tired of passing on responsibility. The West this, the regime that. No more blame. Time to take back control.

Keyvan *(crying)* My Ghazaleh, my daughter. Please khanom, from one parent to another /

Mandana But I am a mother, first and foremost. And you hear my voice from the land of the most compassionate of mothers. Mothers that would break their daughters' legs for fear that they may hurt their ankles on our very hard pavements.

Keyvan You have the soul of a poet, khanom.

Mandana Thank you, Keyvan.

Mandana *stands over him with the scateurs*

Mandana Now I'm going to cut your balls off.

Starter: Kabob-e Donbalan (Lamb 'Fries' Kebab)

Tala

You might think this somewhat of a culinary curiosity, but it is considered a delicacy in many parts of Iran. (*She holds up a pair of testicles*) They are excellent as an appetiser served with your pomegranate juice, or as a side dish to your *ghormeh-sabzi*. Remove the thin outer membranes, then cut one in half vertically. Paint them with melted butter, a sprinkle of salt and pepper, then grill them for 4-5 minutes, turning frequently. Known as *kabob-e donbalan*, or lamb 'fries' kabob in the West, to shield them from the horror of what they're actually cooking. They also go by the name 'rocky mountain', 'prairie oysters', or the typically brash, flamboyant and hypermasculine 'swinging steaks' in the U.S.. The French have a characteristically sophisticated name for them; *caprice de femme* - lady's whim. We just call them testicles, and they're best served hot, straight off the grill.

Evening

A dim, outdoor light barely illuminates a large object (Keyvan) on the patio table, which is covered in a blood spotted white sheet

Inside, the women sit around a set table. Ghormeh sabzi, rice and a side of kabob-e donbalan are laid out in serving dishes. Mandana eats the kabob-e donbalan, Tala and Zoya do not eat. They sit watching their mother

Zoya (to Tala) Is the ghormeh sabzi...clean?

Tala It's lamb, if that's what you're asking.

Zoya serves herself some stew and eats

Mandana I wouldn't use him in stew anyway, not enough fat. He would work better as kabob. You really should try the *donbalan*, Zoya. Quite delicious.

Tala gets up and goes through Zoya bag, taking out the wrap of cocaine. She cuts herself a defiant line and does it all up one nostril.

Mandana You're trying to shock me.

Tala Shock you? I don't think you've got a nerve ending left in your body.

Mandana I've never felt more alive.

Tala takes out a cigarette and stands by the door smoking

Tala We're fucked.

Mandana Not as fucked as he is.

Tala And what am I meant to with the body on my patio?

Mandana Prepare, package and freeze. Bury the bones.

Tala As easy as that.

Mandana Why not? You have no problem burying the past.

Mandana throws Tala's passport onto the table

Tala I was going to tell you.

Mandana What? That it was an accident? That it dropped out your pocket accidentally while you were tilling the earth?

Tala Every time I make that trip, it's a thousand questions from the government here. Then it's triple checks at passport control, double that when I get to Iran. And at dad's funeral I'm surrounded by self-righteous socialists, silver-haired foxes asking "Ah, you're the *business* daughter" or "How's your brave, younger sister?" or "What did your father have to say about your deflection

to the West?” while all I can think about is, will I have to bribe my way out of the country? Will I be allowed back into this country? I got out ok, but this time, getting back in wasn’t so easy. I spent 6 hours in a little office at Heathrow passport control “What was the purpose of your visit?...Who did you visit?...Do you have any connections with the regime?” They would leave me for half an hour, then a different officer would come in, ask the same questions, over and over again.

Mandana They were *ablambu*-ing you.

Tala No better than dad’s friends. Your friends. I’m tired of feeling like a traitor.

Mandana You’re abandoning me.

Tala Feels like I lost you years ago.

Mandana It was never meant to be forever.

Tala Dad got softer, wiser, while you got harder, more bloody-minded.

Mandana Things were meant to get better.

Tala Better? This is as bad as it gets.

Mandana It was never meant to be forever. You’ll return one day, I kept telling myself, you’ll come back when things get better. Then, Zoya was gone. I began to lose hope in the cause, all our efforts only brought death to the family. Your father distanced himself from politics, but friends were still vanishing. I hadn’t given up hope of finding my brother, or Geev, but words weren’t working. The people were powerless, their activism, inert. My brother always believed in peaceful means, but he wasn’t around anymore. And I knew for a fact that he hadn’t left this earth according to his beliefs, he hadn’t left this earth peacefully. He took his last breath in agony, surrounded by grinning malice.

The streets felt less and less safe, so I would take a knife when I went out. Just a small scoring knife, never expecting I’d have to use it. One night, after returning from the bazaar, a ‘beard’ made it his job to follow me home. That kind of thing happened a lot, you remember Tala, happened a few times to you before you left. Nothing new, but the fear that came from having that shadow behind you, that never got old. (to Tala) You remember that feeling? Constantly fighting the urge to look over your shoulder, like you can feel his hands around your neck, like you’re choking.

I don’t know what made me stop and turn that evening, but I reasoned that I was just going to ask politely if I could help him with anything. He was on me quickly, and as the words came out of my mouth, I saw this surprised look on his face. His eyes went very wide, very quickly, then dulled. He sat down with this gurgling sound. His body sagged. It was only when I looked at him on the floor that I noticed the knife in my hand. I put it back in my pocket and

walked away. I wasn't panicked or sweating. I didn't run, though did have a bounce in my step.

I became involved in some of my husband's more radical friends, those that wanted to turn the tide, by whatever the most effective means. Small scale stuff. The men would disguise themselves as women, putting on the full hijab and heading to the quieter parts of town to ensnare some 'beard' or other. They'd bundle them into the car, bring them back to headquarters, where I would be waiting for them. We only wanted to scare them, persuade them to change their minds about their allegiances to the regime, maybe get some information about those who disappeared. I got good at it. Nothing too serious, few cuts and bruises, most of them were just frightened boys without any direction. Occasionally, we'd get a General. They'd be harder to crack, so we had to break them. Once or twice, beyond repair, but what's one less rat in the kitchen?

Zoya Jesus. Our mum, the exterminator.

Mandana If I was going to get you back, I had to get rid of the vermin that were keeping you away.

Tala You must have realised you weren't going to change a thing.

Mandana I could still ask questions. Hope that one of them would know something about my brother, about Geev. One of them had to know something. If I could get that information, then I knew you'd come home.

Tala You did all this because you're lonely?

Mandana I did this because I want my family to be safe, so we can be together again. You don't how hard it's been since your father passed.

Tala Zoya? Please tell me you have something sane to contribute.

Zoya takes a moment

Zoya I slept like a baby last night, for the first time in twenty years.

Tala You said it wasn't him.

Zoya I said I didn't recognise him.

Tala But you're no closer to finding Geev.

Zoya I'm tired, Tala. Tired of being haunted, tired of hunting. Revenge is a dish that never satisfies, hot or cold.

Tala Yet we have a table full of it.

Mandana You should always be grateful for a full table.

Tala *(losing it)* It's not the fucking 40's, mum! It's not the famine. It's not the 50's, not Abadan, not Mossadegh, or the C.I.A., or Churchill. It's not the 70's, or the Shah, or the revolution, or the Ayatollah. It's not the executions of '88, or the student protests of '99. It's not 9/11, or nuclear weapons, or sanctions! This is not Iran...It was meant to be us, together. Looking out over the English Channel, watching the sun go down over a nice family dinner, made with ingredients fresh from the garden (*Mandana goes to say something*) not the fucking gardener himself!

Bob *(off)* Knock knock!

Tala Oh shit.

Mandana *(calls)* Bob! Come in, come in.

Tala quickly puts out her cigarette. Bob enters. Tala attempts to block his view of Keyvan throughout

Bob If I'm not intruding.

Mandana Always welcome at our table, Bob.

Bob *(inhales)* Somethings smells...actually, can I smell cigarettes?

Tala Must be the neighbours, the other neighbours.

Bob Aren't they fitness instructors?

Tala Everyone has a vice, right?

Mandana Bob, you've met Zoya before?

Bob Ah, the hip Londoner. How is the big city?

Zoya Hasn't been 'hip' since the 70s.

Mandana And it's not the 70s, Bob.

Bob I've always struggled to keep up. That's why I like it here, much slower pace.

Mandana The quiet life, eh?

Bob Can't beat it.

Mandana Although you do have a bit of an infestation problem.

Tala Ignore my mother, Bob, her shit is black.

They all look at Tala. Bob takes out a bar of Cussons Imperial Leather and gives it to Mandana

Mandana *(reads)* Cushions...Leather?

Bob Cussons Imperial Leather. A classic soap for a couple of classy people, eh?

Mandana Most gracious Bob, thank you.

Bob Well, one good taarof deserves another.

Bob *looks around*

Bob Keyvan gone for the day?

Tala Gone? For the day, yes. Not gone, gone. Just for the day. Should be back next week.

Bob I see. I wonder if I could have a word with you, Tala?

Tala A word? Sure. What word?

Bob Privately, if possible.

Tala Nothing to hide from my family, Bob.

Bob Of course, yes. Thing is, I was wrong.

Tala Wrong?

Bob Yes, about Keyvan.

Tala What do you mean, wrong?

Bob Well it wasn't me, strictly speaking.

Mandana Spit it out, Bob.

Tala Yes, spit it out.

Bob You see, at border control, we work closely with various international crime agencies.

Tala You mentioned something about the NCA, Interpol?

Bob Right, well they help us identify the more nefarious foreign elements that enter our country, but they're not magicians, sometimes it takes months, years even to gather evidence. But they do have a list.

Tala A list?

Bob Yes. And when someone on that list comes into the country, their name gets flagged up.

Tala Right?

Bob Now, I don't want you to panic, but I had a call this afternoon from a colleague at one of these agencies. Now, he told me that Keyvan's name is on that list.

Tala Keyvan?

Bob Now I don't want you to panic /

Tala You keep saying that.

Bob but by all accounts, he's a very dangerous man.

Mandana By whose accounts?

Bob Well, we have more than enough victims of the regime land on our shores. Over the years we have managed to build a profile of a man, a very nasty piece of work. A very effective tool, high up in the regime.

Mandana You can't mean that little old man? He's just a simple gardener. Him, a tool of the regime?

Bob And not just the regime, by all accounts. His skills were used by the Shah's secret police as well.

Mandana My goodness, how do you know all this by all accounts?

Bob He must have left hundreds of victims in his wake, because they have dozens of testimonies. The younger ones at first. Then, over time, more came forward. We believe it was the strength of the community that brought the older victims forward, families and friends connecting the dots.

Mandana Well, we have to look out for each other.

Bob *notices the cocaine and rolled up note, becoming suspicious*

Bob Indeed.

Mandana No one else is going to do it for us.

Tala, *still 'guarding' Keyvan by the patio, inadvertently lights a cigarette*

Bob I thought you said it was the neighbours smoke?

Tala *notices what she has done and stamps out the cigarette immediately. Bob picks up the rolled-up note*

Bob I have to say, you're somewhat on edge.

Tala Me? No. I'm fine, just trying to aid digestion.

Bob *approaches Tala and the corpse. Mandana picks up the meat hammer*

Bob Bit of a dark horse, aren't you, Tala?

Tala No one's as they seem, by all accounts.

Bob Always thought I could take you at face value.

Tala Says the man who invited a killer into my home.

Mandana *raises the meat hammer above Bob's head*

Zoya Actually, Tala, let's be fair.

Mandana *lowers the hammer as Bob turns.*

Zoya Bob's done us a favour, and one good taroof deserves another. Bob, you must try this.

Zoya serves him a portion of testicle.

Zoya A true Iranian delicacy.

Bob What's in it?

Mandana That would be spoiling the surprise.

Bob's mood switches, he smiles and sits. The women join him, Zoya serves them each a portion. Bob takes a bite

Bob Oh my, that's very...interesting.

Zoya Good, huh?

Bob Smooth.

Mandana Yes, we got rid of all the ups and downs.

The women eat

Bob Well, isn't this civilised.

Main: Chelow Kabob (Skewered Kebabs)

Zoya and Mandana join Tala in preparing the food

Tala Although some claim that ghormeh sabzi is the national dish, chelow kabob is the one that actually wears the crown. Equivalent to the American's 'burger and fries', it consists of saffron steamed rice (chelow) and kabob-e barg; skewers of lamb, veal or beef strips marinated in saffron, onions and lime juice. Skewers of ground lamb, kabob-e kubideh, can also be added. When both types of skewered lamb are included, the dish is called chelow kabob-e soltani, which literally means "fit for a Sultan".

There is another type of kabob, kabob-e donban. Instead of ground meat, use shoulder. Place the whole shoulder on the chopping board, and use two sharp cleavers to mince the lamb (Mandana *does so with skill*). Sprinkle the onion on top and continue to chop until the onion and the lamb are minced together. Add your herbs and spices, and two egg yolks to help with the bonding of the mixture.

This kabob also needs extra-wide skewers. It is said that the first person to make this kabob used his sword as skewer, a tradition we're honouring today. To serve, chelow-style, place the skewer of meat directly onto your rice and, holding it down with your thumb, quickly pull out the skewer, leaving the sizzling kabobs behind. (Zoya *does so, with a flurry. She stands one side of Tala brandishing the sword. Mandana on the other side, wielding the cleavers*) And there you have it, a meal fit for the most insatiable appetite.

4

A couple of weeks later. Mandana and Tala. A basket of rose petals sits on the kitchen table. Suitcases close by, packed and ready to go

Tala You have your tablets?

Mandana For the good they do me.

Tala I'm sure you'll feel better once you're back on home ground.

Mandana You'll feel better don't you mean?

Tala takes out her passport and tickets

Tala Can't get rid of me that easily.

Zoya *(off)* Coo-coo!

Zoya enters and bows

Zoya Her majesty's royal carriage awaits.

Mandana No taarof bullshit now.

Zoya Fine, get in the cab oyster face.

Mandana There's a fine line you know.

Tala Now we know what happens when you cross it.

Zoya *(rose petals)* I see you've replanted.

Tala Just trying to avoid soil sickness, had to dig out the holes nice and deep.

Zoya Plenty of room to lay down some bone meal for the roots.

Tala Something like that.

They look out into the garden towards the roses

Mandana They look beautiful.

Zoya They really do, sis.

Tala Well, they deserve a fresh start.

They continue to look, slowly coming together and holding each other gently

Zoya *(breaking away)* Come on now, time and tide and scheduled departures wait for no woman.

Tala *(kissing Zoya)* You'll be ok?

Zoya Got a lifetime of catching up to do. Question is, where to start.

Tala How about the bazaar, stock up on fresh ingredients. I'll be there in a few weeks, be nice to make something together.

Tala kisses her mother

Tala And don't forget your socks, you know, you're plane socks. And call me when you get there.

Mandana So much fuss, it's like you'll never see me again.

Tala holds back tears

Tala *(in Farsi, then repeating in English)* You're my liver, my knees, my eyes.

Mandana Stop that, you're making me hungry.

Tala hands them silver foil wraps

Tala We had some *chelow kabob* left, so I made you a snack for the airport.

Mandana Good, everything there is overpriced and under seasoned.

Tala Just don't take it through the metal detector.

Mandana Are you joking, this one had no iron in his blood.

Tala I meant the silver foil. *(to Zoya)* I've put all her documents in the front pocket, so she can get to them easily.

Mandana I can manage. Honestly, you two act as if I didn't squeeze you out into this world. I'm very proud of you both, very proud.

Mandana *gathers some of her things and leaves*

Mandana *(off)* Zoya, *burroh-de-geh!*

Zoya kisses Tala and goes. Tala picks up the rose petals and holds them up to her nose, inhaling deeply

Dessert/Digestif – Khorma (Dates)

Tala After all that meat, we need a little something to aid digestion. (*she holds up a date*) The humble date. This fruit has almost mystical qualities attached to in Iran, where in ancient times the attributes of the sun god Mithra – well built, lofty and strong – were said to be jointly represented by the date palm and the cypress tree.

The date palm is also the subject of many folktales. One of them focuses on the supposed similarities between the palm and humans: the existence of males and females, as well as hermaphrodites; the similarity between the scents of date pollen and semen; the susceptibility of the female palm to fall in love with the nearby male palm. Though why they would after they'd smelled their semen is beyond me.

However, they do have comparable longevity, and both have erect postures. And the comparisons don't stop there, in some regions of the country killing a date palm is akin to killing a person and is considered very unlucky.

Personally, I don't believe in luck. Like politics and religion, I leave it to the manipulators and mystics of the world. What I do believe in is family. There's nothing more important to me than sitting down with them at a table. That's my idea of paradise. A chance to try and overcome our differences, talk of our hopes and fears, maybe even vanquish the odd ghost. All over a good, hot meal, of course. *Nush-e joon*.

She pops the date in her mouth and eats

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