
THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN THE UK: ACCOMMODATING “BRITISHNESS”MAURICE O’CONNOR
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**ABSTRACT**

This paper sets out to explore the growth of the Indian diaspora within the UK. First of all, we shall evidence how, despite the humble beginnings of this diasporic community, their strong sense of community and tenacity has helped them gain visibility within British society. From there, we shall look at the complexities of this heterogeneous community and how they have negotiated new spaces within a society that, initially, was hostile to their presence. Despite a prevailing multicultural ethos, we shall then evidence how a system of ‘adjacent cultures’ has been installed within the UK. To further our understanding on this mutual isolation within diversity we shall apply Homi Bhabha’s theories on cultural difference. Then we shall look at a number of biographies and life writings, penned by South Asian authors, so as to elucidate upon this theoretical background.

KEYWORDS: Indian community UK; multiculturalism; adjacent cultures; cultural difference**RESUMEN** *La diáspora india del Reino Unido: amoldarse a lo británico*

El presente artículo explora el crecimiento de la diáspora india dentro del contexto británico. En primer lugar, demostraremos que a pesar de los orígenes humildes de esta comunidad diaspórica, su fuerte sentido de comunidad y su tenacidad les ha ayudado a hacerse visibles dentro de la sociedad británica. En segundo lugar, y partiendo de este hecho, analizaremos las complejidades de esta comunidad heterogénea y cómo han sabido negociar espacios nuevos dentro de una sociedad que, en principio, era hostil a su presencia. Pasaremos, después, a discutir cómo se ha instalado en el Reino Unido un sistema de “culturas adjacencias” por encima de un carácter multicultural imperante. Para profundizar en el tema del aislamiento mutuo dentro de la diversidad aplicaremos las teorías de Homi Bhabha sobre las diferencias culturales. Por último, nos detendremos en una serie de biografías y memorias escritas por autores asiáticos para aportar más luz a esta base teórica

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunidad india del Reino Unido; multiculturalismo; convivencia cultural; diferencia cultural

In this paper we shall explore the question of British Indian identity and how this diasporic group has negotiated and met the challenges of living in a multicultural nation in the making. Within a post-independence context, the UK has been one of the territories on to which peoples from the Indian subcontinent have projected their migratory aspirations. Residual linguistic and cultural affinities culled during the colonial epoch fomented Britain as a “natural choice” for immigration, and many of the educated class felt that they already knew England and its ways. Compared to other destinations, England was not conceived as “foreign” and Indians felt they were well equipped to adapt to Britain’s social and cultural mores. Jawaharlal Nerhu, for example, was a confessed anglophile and his affiliation with England mirrored a generalised anglophied Indian identity prevalent within a particular Indian social class that perceived itself as mobile.¹

India has the second largest diasporic population after China and there is an increasing consensus that this global diasporic group is becoming evermore influential in the day-to-day running affairs of the Indian state. While the Asian British diasporic group is still influential, it is the diasporic group in the United States that wields most power and directly intervenes in Indian economic questions. This state of affairs mirrors perceptions within the subcontinent where the upwardly mobile no longer perceive Britain as being capable of fulfilling their ambitions while destinations such as Canada, Australia, and the US are deemed more suitable. Strong family ties, nonetheless, mean that the UK is still a destination for many Asians and their experiences as diasporans range from the self-contained community where engagement at a profound level with the autochthonous population is absent to those who have fully assimilated to their surroundings. While the common perception is that South Asians became a part of the British social landscape after the Second World War, they have been a presence within the UK since the late 1800s. Frederick Akbar Mahomed, in 1879, published in *The Lancet* a ground-breaking work on the cause and development

¹ If we look to the prime movers within the independence movement in India, most of those who studied abroad did so in the UK (a salient exception being B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit political leader, who first studied at Columbia University before moving to the London School of Economics). This meant that many of the politicians of the new nation state had been intellectually formed in a culturally specific way and these ideologies would enter into a complex syncretism with other ideas such as a communal form of social spiritualism epitomised by the thoughts and actions of Gandhi.

of hypertension. In 1887, Abdul Karim became a part of the royal household as Queen Victoria's servant, went on to teach the Queen Hindustani and subsequently became one of her closest advisers. As early as 1889, Britain's first purpose-built mosque (the Shah Jahan Mosque) was established in Woking by Dr As Gottlieb Leitne. By 1892, South Asians had their first Member of Parliament in the person of Dadabhai Naoroji (former professor of Gujarati at University College, London and founder of the London Zoroastrian Association), who was elected Liberal MP for Central Finsbury.

The first group of Indians to arrive to the UK during the early 1950s was the Sikh community, many of whom were qualified doctors who had come to take up posts within the fledgling NHS. The first waves of post-war South Asian immigrants to Britain in general were motivated by the fact that the British workforce had been decimated as a result of the Second World War. This lack of manpower was compounded by an increasing attitude amongst local workers to shun many kinds of "menial jobs", and it was predominantly the Hindu immigrant population that would first fill this yawning gap within a late capitalist labour market. Subsequently to this influx of Hindus to the UK came the Pakistani Muslims, whilst the latest immigrant group from the subcontinent is comprised of Bangladeshi Muslims. Despite their humble beginnings, Asian émigrés were particularly driven by their belief in and respect for the power of education as a way to prosper and climb social ladders. The arrival of an educated business class of Indians from the former British African colonies of Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Malawi during the 1970s furthermore helped infuse the Asian diasporic community with new optimism.² This East African Asian community, however, met with much local hostility, notably in Leicester where a large influx of Asian expelled from Idi Amin's Uganda came to settle. (On the 7th of August 1972, Amin announced that all non-Ugandan Asians had ninety days to quit the country; some 30,000 British passport holders came to the UK.)

The current number of successful business people, multimillionaires and thriving middle-class professionals residing in the UK is testimony to how far Asians have come since the mid-1950s, but ambition alone is not the only factor in this diasporic "success story". As Asaf Hussain (2005) assures, "The reason why the Indian diaspora progressed was because it had a diaspora philosophy, which had two aspects. First, the

² Asaf Hussain (2005) gives a full account of the importance of this second wave of immigration in his "The Indian Diaspora in Britain: Political Interventionism and Diaspora Activism".

Indians were proud of their culture and were ready to spread it anywhere. Second, the Indians had a strong identity as Indians” (201). Hussain identifies the development of an Indian food market and Indian fashion industry, the “open-door” policy to Hindu temples and festivals, the prestige value of Indian classical music and the development of a Bollywood-style film industry based in Leicester as being among some of the factors that have elevated Asian status within Britain (194-5). This recent crossover of Asian culture into mainstream British culture can be perceived within the popular arts. Film directors such as Gurinder Chadha, Mira Nair and Ashuntosh Gowariker, or the screening on primetime TV of shows such as *The Kumars at No. 42* or *Goodness Gracious Me*, all testify to the visibility of Asians within the UK.

This recent fomenting of Indian culture within the diaspora and its crossover into mainstream British culture has been backed up by a strong economic position that Asians had secured within the UK. Hussain indicates that in 2003 the British-Indian collective sent 10 billion pounds sterling to India (197), a sum that gives a strong indication of the economic clout of this community. Through their ingrained tenacity and aspiration towards higher education, diasporan Indians have penetrated the middle classes and this means that the cultural spaces that have been created within a closed British society can be bolstered and maintained (Hussain 196). A manifestation of this new-found wealth is the setting up of ostentatious “halls” whose construction are promoted by a financially buoyant community seeking a place of reunion. As Sanjay Suri (2006) confirms, “Every hall is a fortress resisting that modern march towards a mix of people where only individuals may matter, not where those individuals come from” (83). The hall, thus, is not solely a means of keeping diasporic culture alive, but also has the added function of monitoring caste and making sure that as many marriages are maintained within the caste system as possible. So, while Asians in general maintain a strong filiation to their country of origin, caste has played a strong role in dividing the homogeneous nature of the Asian diaspora. These subdivisions have been fomented in part by the sheer number of Asians and British Asians residing within the UK, where each caste-defined group has sufficient members to be self-sufficient.

The current percentage of Asians residing in urban areas of the UK is testimony to both the strength of this community and to its divided nature. If we look at the city of Leicester alone, we find that a quarter of its population is Indian (this figure does not include other Asian populations such as Pakistani or Bangladeshi), while in the Greater

London area boroughs such as Harrow, Brent or Hounslow are closely following suit. Suri defines the heart of “Indian Leicester” as feeling like “a touchdown in India” (4), and describes Leicester as “the first big town in the West where whites are steadily declining into minority status” (3). Many of these mid-size British towns have succumbed their traditional Anglo-Saxon feel and have been instead transformed into high streets lined with Gujarati vegetarian cafes, sari shops and Rajasthani jewellers, where a distinct waft of frying ghee and spices “colonises in reverse” (to quote Louise Bennet, the late Jamaican poet) the northern air. Many Indians who come to live in the UK tend to gravitate towards these urban centres where they know they will be understood and taken care of. Despite the intimate knowledge that many Indians possess of Britain through their colonial education, the fact remains that there are many elements of English and Indian culture that remain reciprocally incommensurable. When confronted by this cultural “strangeness”, many Asians take refuge in these “ghettoised” communities where they do not constantly have to “explain” their differences to white interlocutors or face down latent racism that still prevails in parts of British society. This sense of difference is also felt by more mobile Asians who, as Yasmin Hai testifies, still feel a certain “angst” despite being constantly told that they live in a racially tolerant environment: “Our anger was also the dynamic that helped feed our creative passions, but sometimes it just felt all-consuming ... They [British Asians] were all suffering with problems of ethnic conflict and integration” (267).

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The day-to-day existence of multiracial Britain is often still one of mutual ignorance, which prompts Suri to define cities such as “Multicultural Leicester” as more being cities of “adjacent cultures” (14). Suri laments that, while space-sharing is accepted, the colour line is still not being crossed where meaningful social interaction is concerned. To reduce the complexities of a “multicultural” society to a mere confrontation of pigmentation as does Suri is, nonetheless, to simplify a much more complex issue. Colour difference is, no doubt, the most superficial yet most visible marker of difference, and it is one that many émigrés and second generation British Asians are sensitive to when living in a white-dominated UK (in the 2001 census, 87% of the British population still defined themselves as “White British”). So, while skin colour is an external marker and one which Asians themselves can become obsessed

with (Indian marriage columns both on the subcontinent and in the diaspora testify to a grading of aspirant's skin colouring where closer to white means more success at securing a desirable partner), we must turn to the idea of cultural difference to understand the disjunctive nature of multicultural Britain.

Within the last twenty years in Britain, there has been a pronounced move away from the exclusionary and racialized politics of the Thatcher era to an ethos of multiculturalism as fomented by New Labour. However, as Rehana Ahmed (2009) indicates, this apparent accommodating of cultural difference is more superficial than profound and, whilst token gestures to culture difference are used for public display by the establishment, underneath we find that the class stratification of society is still firmly in place. Viewed from a minority perspective, making the crossover into mainstream white society whilst holding on to cultural values that are alien to western liberalism is problematized to say the least. Cultural difference, it would seem, is a motivating factor that can lead to being materially disadvantaged.

The limits of liberal multiculturalism are exposed when members of a minority group enact, or seek to enact, cultural practices (e.g. arranged marriages; the wearing of the Hijab; protests against 'offensive' creative works) which threaten the liberal ideology of autonomous individual 'choice' or 'freedom', thereby positioning themselves beyond liberal 'tolerance' (Ahmed 28).

It is useful, therefore, to introduce the term "incommensurable" in relation to this concept of cultural difference; these tensions which Homi K. Bhabha defines in *The Location of Culture* (1994) as being peculiar to borderline existences. This metaphorical border is what delimits urban spaces in multicultural societies yet, like all borders, they can become porous, can be crossed or shifted. Cultural difference is incommensurable in that, rather than being a simplistic recognition of multiculturalism, it represents both the singularity and the complexity of identity at the boundary of cultures. This incommensurable or untranslatable moment of cultural difference is, thus, the most effective way of understanding why a phenomena of adjacent cultures can become installed in "multicultural societies" if no real effort is made by both parties to at least address and try come to terms with those untranslatable elements encoded within discrete cultures.

Bhabha is particularly interested in Benjamin's (1970) understanding of liminality, the element of resistance entailed within the process of translation: "...that

element in a translation that does not lend itself to translation” (75). Bhabha (1994) looks at these border spaces from the perspective of their untranslatability, “a difference within”, where the cultural difference of the hybrid escapes binary constructions (13-14). Hybridity is thus understood as the crossover that occurs principally within second generation diasporans or educated first-generation émigrés who have become sensitive to the constructed nature of national identity. It is not just some exotic mix where identity becomes diffused into sameness but, rather, it is the moment of cultural singularity that is in itself constructed across the bar of difference. This contrasts with the North American “melting pot” model, which ultimately wishes to water down all cultural difference to a sameness that is essentially Anglo-Saxon culture dressed up in exotic clothing. Hanif Kuresihi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* lampoons this weak notion of multiculturalism by highlighting the hypocrisy of a white society that holds preconceived ideas on how Asians should think and behave. As with the mechanisms of the fetish, certain sectors of British society tend to isolate exotic elements from Indian culture and project them on to an “Asian other” whilst simultaneously demanding weakened versions of cultural difference. In this light, Hussain assures that “British culture was confused and did not know how to accommodate the South Asians, it was contradictory” (193). Policymakers saw that the prevalent colonial syndrome was thwarting attempts at assimilation so they abandoned a “melting pot” approach for a “salad bowl” one. Yet, from an establishment point of view, each ethnic group maintaining its own identity within the “big mix” is now perceived as a failure, as it is seen as undermining the national loyalty of these migrant British groups. From the migrant perspective, many still feel that while they enjoy full citizenship, they are excluded from the essentially white-dominated sense of nationality. One of the impacts of the “colonial syndrome” discussed is that, “It disillusioned the younger generation who were British-born and those searching for new identities. Their identities changed from being migrant to becoming diaspora” (Hussain 193).

Sanjay Suri’s informants evince how the anxieties that can arise from being confronted by two opposing worlds can lead to a radicalising of thought. Tina, a second-generation Gujarati adolescent from Leicester, speaks of the difficult transition from her Asian-dominated environment to the “alien” white one. Up until tertiary education, Tina’s classmates had been 96% Indian, but at Leicester University she is

confronted by her own cultural difference, and an incident at an English literature seminar³ brings home this difference and leads her to conclude that:

It suddenly occurred to me at that point that my thinking and theirs was so different. I felt stupid because of that. Also, my tutor didn't explain that you can have different interpretations based on culture and life experiences ... What I found was that all the rest of them had a white perspective rather than an Asian cultural perspective. So, my thinking in a lot of areas is different. (40)

For diasporans, a hypersensitivity to the image of the self can occur when they are isolated from their ethnic group in a white-dominated society. This hypersensitivity can sometimes lead to the kind of interpretations we have seen expressed by Tina which produces entrenched positions. So, while Suri does not fully agree with Tina's interpretation of the situation which is informed by a distinct cultural interpretation, the important conclusion is that, "finally it mattered only that Tina had read it differently from the others. And that she believed that this was because she was Indian, and they were white British" (44).

Rather than a retreat into the ethnic "comfort zone", other diasporic Asians prefer integration at any cost. Nonetheless, there comes a point where, despite attempts at neutralising ethnicity, difference is unveiled. One could thus view this impasse as being constructed along the modes of cultural mimicry on the one hand, and the fraught nature of incommensurable cultural difference on the other. In light of Bhabha (1994) it must be remembered that "mimicry conceals no presence of identity behind its mask" (88), which indicates that there *is* no "essential identity" to which the subject can recur. Despite efforts to mask ethnic or linguistic difference, memories, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to the autochthonous culture cannot be contained within a reductive model of social and cultural adaptation and these differences will always emerge from behind the mask of mimicry. Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (2002), for example, is illustrative in the manner it explores questions of mimicry and the sense of inadequacy that comes about when one attempts to mask one identity with another. Kunzru employs allegory to flag up the hypocrisy of a multicultural England that will not accept the other's

³ The incident is centred around a seminar on Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market". The class consensus is that the poem essentially deals with loss of virginity while Tina prefers to interpret it in a non-sexual way, focusing more on loss of innocence in a non-sexual way. Her white class mates refuse to accept this interpretation and even laugh in her face as they find her reading ethnically biased. Suri, in his own reading of Rossetti's poem, sides with the white classroom, although he assures that interpreting the poem as a loss of innocence could include the loss of virginity, but much more.

difference and, through a reducing of difference to racial stereotype, fails to recognise the complexities of Asian hybrid identities.

Forging this hybrid identity is thus fraught with certain difficulties. Ahmed (2007), for example, despite his encounters with a lack of accommodating his difference or outright racism, soldiers on to create an Islamic identity for himself whilst simultaneously praising Britain and the West's commitment to "personal freedom, social equality, human rights, justice" (276). Ironically, as Robert Young (2008) sets out in *The Idea of English Ethnicity*, nineteenth-century notions of Englishness were never really about England per se. Instead they were fabrications of ethnic traits, a type of template for those who either did not reside in England but who wished to affiliate with the idea of it, or for those of other nationalities who were provided with a stereotype to reproduce:

Englishness was created for the diaspora — an ethnic identity designed for those who were precisely not English, but rather of English descent ... Americans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans.... Englishness was constructed as a translatable identity that could be adopted or appropriated anywhere by anyone who cultivated the right language, looks, and culture (1-2).

The writer V.S. Naipaul is an example of how a subject assimilates this artificial English identity. As Sandhu (2003) observes, Naipaul employs darkness in his early work as a metaphor for his own sense of colonial inferiority, while the move to the metropolis cures "the psychological deformations that a colonial upbringing can wreak, to switch from ignorance to enlightenment" (196). Yasmin Hai similarly reflects on her own father's insecurity when faced with a white British society, despite his total assimilation to British culture. When flicking through a family photo album Hai finds a picture of her father, newly arrived from Pakistan, posing in front of Buckingham Palace: "He looks the picture of a model English gentleman. Or is it more like the picture of a foreigner playing at being English — dressing more English than the English?" (11). What Hai effectively visualises is her father's mimicry of the constructed notion of an Englishman and the inherent irony that her father will never be accepted as such. This is the hard reality many Asian men had to face up to (traditional gender roles meant that men were the breadwinners and were thus under more pressure to climb social ladders) and for this reason many second-generation diasporans, on having witnessed their parents' frustration regarding integration, reject this

masquerading behind “Englishness” and opt for new identity models. We must also take into consideration that many of these first generation émigrés had made the journey to Britain alone and never felt that it would be their permanent home. Adapting to British ways was thus a strategy for these (in their majority) males to make their “sojourn” as plain sailing as possible. As return was always unquestionable, they didn’t see this temporary assimilation as problematic. However, when they began to accept that Britain was “home”, people like the Sikh men who had cut their hair and stopped wearing their turban began to reappropriate their identities of origin.

The forging of a hybrid identity is thus not always readily available to everyone. Sanjay Suri’s informant, Tina, for example, finds that as a sole Asian amongst 200 whites on the English literature module at Leicester, she has to always “explain” things or apologise for certain attitudes to her white companions. Her college experience is a lonely one and she concludes that she prefers being “on the Indian than on the white side of things” (41). So while Tina and other second generation Asians like her are often linguistically and culturally bilingual (and can sometimes serve as interpreters for their parents), they can still feel uncomfortable in exclusively white environments where they sense that those core values and many other small yet important details of their culture are rejected or simply not understood. Therefore, while second generation Asians are generally more confident about articulating their hybrid identity, first generation émigrés tend to make self-conscious efforts at adapting to British ways and will sometimes discard certain ethnic traits in an attempt to blend. However, when these attempts are perceived as being quirky or they come up against the glass ceilings installed within British society, then this initial impetus sours and a radical return to autochthonous culture can take place.

Yasmin Hai explores the difficulties and paradoxes of cultural assimilation through the autobiographical figure of her father and of his determinacy to “adapt” to British ways. Hai narrates Mr Hai’s “radical project to make his wife English!” by burning her burqa and headscarves; what Hai defines as a “symbolic version of bra burning” (25). But these outward gestures at integration are never sufficient, a point Hai emphasises when she says that “while becoming British, vis-à-vis a passport, had been relatively easy, becoming English was proving to be much harder” (15). The distinction Hai makes here is between citizenship (holding a British passport) and ethnicity (the notion of Englishness). Sanjay Suri, however, observes that certain Asians understand

“Britishness” as referring to a type of caste system where skin colour and other more subtle identity markers exclude Asians. This discrimination can come as a shock to many professional Asians who migrate to the UK to find that their qualifications are not recognised and society does not afford them those privileged career positions they are accustomed to. When Suri questions an informant on this issue of belonging he replies: “Discrimination is here [in the UK] just like there is in the caste system. You will always be portrayed under this Asian banner. But when I am Ravidassia, I am not just Asian. At least I know who I am” (215).

These conflicting stances on the exclusive or inclusive nature of “Britishness” are revealing. Whilst Suri’s informant does not expect him or his children to be accepted as being British, a more informed generation of South Asians feel comfortable with their inclusion within a new sense of Britishness. A salient attitude amongst second generation group of Asians who, while recognising their ethnic origins, do not wear them as a badge. This is also true of people of Caribbean origin (both African-Caribbean and Asian-Caribbean) who, similarly, have had to navigate through the complexities of adapting to a nation that, in many ways, remains monocultural in its ethos. The idea of multiculturalism was an attempt to break out of that mould. However, one must not see this urban phenomenon as being paradigmatic of the diasporic experience in Britain and, as Caryl Phillips (2006) indicates, “Britain is a deeply class-bound society, with a codified and hierarchical structure which locates the monarchy at the top, with a roster of increasingly ‘marginal’ people as one filters down to the bottom” (5).

The fundamental difference, therefore, between first and second generation Asian diasporic groups is that most first-generation émigrés continue to feel as if they are living between the East and the West. On the contrary, second-generation Asians have limited primary links with the homeland, which are mostly formed through short visits there with their parents. So while there does exist a strong affiliation with this “other” nation, it is a “homeland” constructed through passed-on memories and romanticised imagery. Hai speaks of a re-evaluation through a coming to terms with her own identity once she rejects viewing the world through a white perspective. Having gone through a similar sense of estrangement with her parents’ homeland, contact with other second-generation diasporans in the UK reveals to her “just how British we actually were. [...] we were forging our own history in this country” (216). The

establishment label-switching of “Asians living in England” to “British Asian” has helped people such as Hai to accept their hyphenated status despite her principal reaction of “fraudulently laying claim to this country [the UK]” (161).

The much-cited opening lines of *The Buddha of Suburbia* best contextualise these complexities: “My name is Karim Amir and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost” (3). In an interview with Colin MacCabe (1999) Kureishi reveals:

Whereas when you were called a ‘Paki’, you were really scum. And seeing England from the bottom, from below, in that way — as a victim — was very interesting to me, and also very affecting, I could see, from my father’s point of view. Because he came to England and saw England as the great Rome, you know — as a great cultural centre. (45)

Kureishi, however, has always felt he forms a part of British culture, albeit one that has in the past rejected people like him. This sense of belonging is evident in his writing, above all in his continual references to pop culture,⁴ which comes to represent to the author a freedom from the restrictive norms of conventional British society. What is clear is that for many second-generation Indian diasporans identity is performative in nature⁵ and British Indians tend to affiliate with their heritage and explore their backgrounds. This practice contrasts with many first generation diasporans who saw any form of multiculturalism or ethnic pride as only serving “to perpetuate the ghetto mentality and hold minorities back” (Hai 175). As we have already discussed, the discrepancy between first and second generation Asians is thus often grounded on an “assimilation at all costs” ethos which some of the second-generation population reject. The alternative to this “all or nothing” model is a new kind of Britishness inscribed within the sign of hybridity, no longer understood in exclusively racial terms. The conception of nationhood within the UK is also being reconceptualized within this frame. British society, nonetheless, is still divided between those who accept that multiculturalism and hybridity as a reality, and those who uphold an exclusive sense of national belonging. It is within this disjunctive that British Indians must negotiate their identities.

⁴ Kureishi co-edited the *Faber Book of Pop* (1995) which examined both underground and mainstream pop music through the discourses of fashion, art, reportage and fiction.

⁵ See Stuart Hall (1991) “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities” and “The Local and the Global. Globalization and Ethnicity.” Both in: Anthony D. King (ed.) *Culture, Globalization and the World System*. London: Macmillan (1991).

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