

'Muslim Consciousness' as a challenge to the British tradition of multiculturalism: the case of Riz Ahmed

Manuela Latchoumaya, European Institute

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The British Nationality Act 1948, by creating a Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies, resulted in an unexpected amount of non-white immigration to the UK. As British society was becoming more multicultural, 'race relations problems' (Fieschi et al., 2013) started to emerge – as exemplified by the 1958 Notting Hill race riots. Multiculturalism was subsequently chosen as a form of political management. Initial legislation sought to facilitate the integration of Afro-Caribbean minorities, and was later on extended to include citizens of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent under the term 'Asian'.



Ahmed, R. (2016) [ONLINE] Available from: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BKXwo4aA58q/> [Accessed 30.12.2019].

2. PROBLEM

The British tradition of multiculturalism predominantly developed through the category of 'race'. This empirical development meant that most academic research on ethnic minorities ignored the ways in which religion was a powerful factor of identification for some minority groups (Meer, 2010). British Muslims have thus struggled to incorporate their demands within the British tradition of multiculturalism. For example, Muslim activists could not refer to Incitement to Racial Hatred legislation during the 1989 Rushdie Affair, as Muslims are not legally considered as an ethno-religious group.

3. THEORY: 'MUSLIM CONSCIOUSNESS', MEER (2010)

- Lack of recognition or misrecognition from mainstream society → Historically ascribed identities → **Consciousness that exist in themselves**: 1) Impaired Muslim Consciousness 2) Reactive Muslim Consciousness
- Minorities' resistance and activism → **Consciousness that exist for themselves**: 3) Pragmatic Muslim Consciousness 4) Synthesised Muslim Consciousness

4. METHODOLOGY

This study used a range of materials produced by Riz Ahmed, namely song lyrics, a speech on diversity and representation delivered at the House of Commons in 2017, as well as an essay on airports and auditions published in *The Good Immigrant* (Ahmed, 2016 in Shukla, 2016). This variety of sources was useful in understanding the political context in which a 'Muslim Consciousness' has developed, its nature, and the way in which it manifests itself in Riz Ahmed's work.

5. FINDINGS

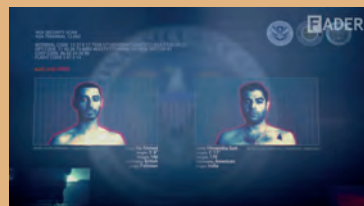
A 'Muslim Consciousness' has developed in conjunction with cyclical factors such as the rise of Islamophobia following the 9/11 attacks. Many British Muslims started to identify as Muslims because they were labelled as such by mainstream society. As Riz Ahmed himself puts it, '[t]he fluidity of [his] own personal identity (...) was further compounded by the changing labels assigned to Asians in general.' (Ahmed, 2016, p.114). However, this does not mean that British Muslims are passive subjects. Riz Ahmed's work challenges dominant understandings of British multiculturalism, as it actively denounces Islamophobia, a form of discrimination that is often neglected by British legislation (Meer, 2010).

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Multiculturalism was initially adopted to facilitate the integration of ethnic minorities. However, British Muslims – who are usually subject to a double form of discrimination linked to their religion and ethnicity - have mobilised themselves to include faith within the British tradition of multiculturalism. Riz Ahmed's embodiment of a synthesised form of Muslim Consciousness demonstrates that British Muslims are active subjects in challenging dominant understandings of British multiculturalism that have traditionally excluded Muslims.



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7. REFERENCES

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- Meer, N. (2010) *Citizenship, Identity, and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.