The Violence of Britishness

'Nadya Ali's book shows how the very idea of Britishness brings with it a racial hierarchy of belonging. Tracing the connections between various policy areas normally discussed in isolation – the hostile environment, Prevent, and citizenship deprivation – the book is a devastating account of how British life is shaped by colonialisms, old and new.'

—Arun Kundnani, author of *The Muslims are Coming!*

'A ground-breaking book detailing how counterterrorism and immigration policy intersect to pressure Muslims and communities of colour to change their behaviour or risk being labelled "extremists" and "terrorists". The book not only contributes to awareness of the ideologies and mechanics of racialised state violence but will provide students, scholars and communities with the tools to challenge and resist state violence in multiple ways. A must read.'

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Liverpool John Moores University and author of *The Suspect*

'How is it that in a society that eschews racism as a toxic remnant of the past, and that adopts explicitly non-racial policies, people of colour and Muslims especially are repeatedly rejected as belonging to Britain? In this sharp analysis of the intersection between counter terrorism and immigration, Nadya Ali shows how any answer must incorporate the structuring role of our colonial past.'

—Alan Lester, Professor of Historical Geography, University of Sussex

'A blistering account of British nationalism's pained but violent psyche. Ali's urgent sweep of the increasingly dense web of cruelties that British bordering visits upon those who do not belong will prove invaluable for those of us who remain committed to a more habitable and caring destiny for this otherwise melancholic and all too often hateful island.'

—Sivamohan Valluvan, author of *The Clamour of Nationalism*

The Violence of Britishness

Racism, Borders and the Conditions of Citizenship

Nadya Ali

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Introduction: Undeserving Citizens

> We are still a long way from comprehending why Britain has shown itself to be incapable of coming to terms with its black and other minority settlers, why it has been quite so hopeless and resistant to the possibility of adjusting that imperilled national identity so that it might be more inclusive, cosmopolitan and habitable.
>
> Paul Gilroy[1]

In 2015, three 15-year-old friends from East London, Shamima Begum, Khadiza Sultana and Amira Abase, left their homes in order to travel to Islamic State-controlled territory. Unbeknownst to the trio, they were being assisted in their travel by an agent working in the employ of Canadian intelligence services, who was expediting their journey to underage marriage, injury and death.[2] The friends were among the estimated 5000 Europeans who migrated from their homes to the newly founded caliphate spanning Northern Syria and Iraq.[3] Four years later, with the Islamic State vanquished, Sultana was reported to have died in a bombing – while Abase's fate is unknown. However, it was Begum who dominated the headlines in Britain. In 2019, the heavily pregnant teenager gave an interview to UK Sky News from a refugee camp in Syria. She asked to be allowed to return to Britain for the sake of her unborn child.

The then home secretary Sajid Javid responded by revoking her British citizenship and effectively making her stateless, a practice which is illegal under international law. In a subsequent appeal against the decision, judges argued that Begum was 'Bangladeshi by descent' according to Bangladeshi nationality law and not at risk of statelessness.[4] However, this assertion was contested by Begum's legal representation on the basis that Bangladesh carries the death sentence for terrorism

offences, for which she could be prosecuted upon arrival. The ruling effectively forced Begum to choose between an uncertain future in a refugee camp, or a potential death sentence in Bangladesh. Despite protestations that she had been groomed by IS and trafficked as a child, Begum was cast as a national traitor by the press and politicians, where her age was immaterial in the face of the offences she was thought to have committed. A month after her citizenship was revoked, Begum's newborn son Jarrah died in al-Roj camp. He was her third child who had died, all of whom were British citizens.

In 2018, at the same time that questions around the future of Britain's Muslims in Syria were being debated, the so-called 'Windrush scandal' broke. It emerged that the Home Office had deported, detained, made jobless, homeless and denied life-saving access to healthcare to 'countless' numbers of British citizens from Commonwealth countries who could not provide evidence of their immigration status. Coverage of this scandal focused primarily on the Windrush generation, or those who had travelled from the Caribbean to Britain after the Second World War. In reality, those with Indian, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage were also affected by the Windrush scandal. One such case was that of 58-year-old David Jameson, who came to the UK from Jamaica as a child on his grandmother's passport in 1966.

According to UK immigration law, those like Jameson who arrived before 1973 are entitled to indefinite leave to remain as Commonwealth citizens.[5] But, unable to provide paperwork to substantiate the date of his arrival and under increasingly punitive immigration rules, Jameson was fired from his construction job for failing to obtain a National Insurance number. He was then detained at Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre where he twice attempted suicide before being deported to Jamaica in 2013. Though he was wrongly deported and is (at the time of writing) homeless, Jameson is not entitled to help that has been made available for other victims of the scandal. This was due to a prior criminal conviction for a minor offence from the London riots in 2011, which barred Jameson from accessing assistance.

The treatment of the Windrush generation was attributed to the destruction of landing cards which had provided a historic record of

Commonwealth citizens who had travelled to the UK. However, the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) shows that what happened to Jameson is not an anomaly, but is instead consonant with the broader pattern of aggressive immigration policing affecting British citizens known as the hostile environment.[6] The Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 mean that if individuals are unable to provide 'lawful evidence' which proves their settled immigration status, then access to employment, healthcare, welfare benefits, education, housing and banking is denied. Employers, landlords, health practitioners, universities and banks are now legally mandated to carry out immigration checks.

How and why should we think the Windrush scandal alongside the treatment of Britain's Muslims? Understanding how the fate of Shamima Begum, a Muslim child of Bangladeshi immigrants, is connected to that of the Jamaican born David Jameson, who had been resident in the UK since he was a child, is imperative. Both of them are counted among Britain's postcolonial citizens who were born in Britain or have lived here most of their lives, yet neither are considered to be adequately British because they are not white.[7] They are always from somewhere else, usually parts of the former British Empire racialised as not white, to where they can ultimately be 'sent back'. This reality has most recently been embodied in the anti-refugee Borders and Nationality Act (2022) that also allows the British state to deprive Britons of their citizenship without notice. Basit Mahmood argues that 'minorities and those of migrant heritage' are most likely to be targeted by citizenship deprivation, noting that almost 'half of all Asian British people in England and Wales are likely to be eligible (50 per cent), along with two in five black Britons (39 per cent)'.[8] For Frances Webber, the act is also part of a longer trajectory of trying to 'de-nationalise' Muslim citizens in particular.[9]

The idea that 'Britishness' is synonymous with whiteness is rooted in the way we selectively remember and forget histories of British colonialism. Histories of a swashbuckling empire are manifest in this nationalist nostalgia of the present, best exemplified by the politics of Brexit. Postcolonial citizens are viewed as perpetual 'immigrants' and 'minorities' in Britain where the clarion call to *take back control*

was at least in part an attempt to pull up the drawbridge and protect what remains of resources that were seen as rightfully belonging to white Britons. Thus, it did not come as a surprise when in June 2022 it emerged that the Home Office had suppressed a report it had commissioned on immigration legislation which argued that 'during the period 1950–81, every single piece of immigration or citizenship legislation was designed at least in part to reduce the number of people with black or brown skin who were permitted to live and work in the UK.'[10]

Nor was it surprising to learn that the Home Office had attempted to 'sanitise' a module designed to teach its employees about 'race, empire and colonialism.'[11] As Jason Arday, who helped design the material, said,

> there seemed to be a reluctance to fully engage with how bad Britain has been in terms of its role in upholding empire and its subsequent hangover. It felt as though the material had been sanitised by civil servants and parliamentarians who did not want to engage with the crux of racism. I felt like we were being asked to engage in historical amnesia.[12]

The attempt to disavow the truth of Britain's racist border policies is part of a longer and more pernicious pattern of colonial amnesia.

The Violence of Britishness begins from the premise that counter-terrorism and immigration policies are both projects of racial bordering which operate in mutually reinforcing ways to 'keep Britain white'. These policy areas have extended and intensified the way racial borders function formally and informally to exclude postcolonial citizens in the service of an idealised white Britain. The analysis draws on changes in Britain's counter-terrorism apparatus and its immigration regimes since 2010. The first policy to be examined is Prevent, a pre-emptive counter-radicalisation strategy launched as part of the War on Terror, which transformed the relationship between the British state and its Muslim citizens. The book then connects these developments to the emergence of the 'hostile environment', which affects a broader spectrum of the citizens who have historically or more recently come to Britain from parts of its former empire.

What is at stake in thinking about the connections between counter-terrorism and immigration? Prevent and the hostile environment appear to us as very different policy areas which are unconnected to one another. Counter-terrorism seeks to combat political violence perpetrated by non-state actors, whereas immigration regimes decide who can and cannot enter Britain and under what conditions. However, the book shows that counter-terrorism and immigration are policy areas which occupy a common ideological terrain. They arbitrate on what constitutes the white British nation and provide material ways through which the borders of the nation can be understood, enforced, and policed. In other words, the Prevent strategy and the hostile environment are grounded in the racialised struggle over what makes Britain 'British'. The violence of 'Britishness' is therefore the expression of a white national identity that operates to the exclusion of populations who fall outside of this category.

Adopting this perspective forces us to rethink how we can understand the relationship between Britishness, counter-terrorism and immigration. In the overarching context of the politics of Brexit and the politics of austerity, questions about who counts as 'British' and who should enjoy the rights and entitlements of British citizenship are a matter of life and death. The victims of the Windrush scandal who died as a result of the denial of life-saving healthcare, or Muslim children left in unliveable conditions in Syrian camps, exemplify the consequences of being cast out. Questions of national identity are fundamental to how we imagine what Britain is, but more importantly what Britain could be. By prioritising the latter question we can begin to collectively imagine and struggle in the name of a Britain that is not premised on racial, gendered, class and other forms of domination.

To underwrite this point more clearly, in understanding that there are connections between the fate of Britain's Muslims and the Windrush generation (and beyond) means rethinking anti-racist organising against state violence. It is not enough to agitate against Prevent on the one hand without also accounting for how immigration regimes also condemn so many to the misery of racial violence, and vice versa. If we fight for David Jameson because we understand that what has happened

to him is a grave injustice, then we must also fight for Shamima Begum and for her three deceased children against this common violence of 'Britishness'.

Deserving and undeserving citizens?

Thinking about David Jameson and Shamima Begum as equal victims of a border violence enacted in the service of white Britain may 'feel' wrong. This feeling – what scholars describe as an 'affect' – is political, insofar as it is tied to the divergent ways in which those at the centre of counter-terrorism scandals and the Windrush scandal have been mediated for us. Exemplifying this divergence in the *Telegraph* is Leo McKinstry, who writes that Shamima's 'continuing presence in a squalid refugee camp is exactly the punishment she deserves for her collusion with one of the most tyrannical, bloodthirsty organisations that history has known. Whatever the submissive, pleading stance she now adopts, Begum is no victim'.[13]

A *Sun* headline from the same period noted, 'No Regrets; No Remorse; No Entry' as a justification for not bringing Begum home to the UK.[14] The *Metro* meanwhile proclaimed 'Jihadi Bride Wants Baby on NHS', dexterously combining multiple moral panics about 'Jihadi brides', teen pregnancy and health tourism into one headline.[15] For Allison Pearson, again in the *Telegraph*, Shamima's actions betrayed an almost unbearable ingratitude for being born 'in such a country' (Britain) where she benefitted from a free education not available to Muslim girls in other parts of the world.[16]

The food critic, and self-described liberal, Grace Dent argued that Shamima and her friends were an example of 'horror-movie ghouls who hate Britain, gays, democracy, the rights of women and religious freedom'.[17] These framings rendered Shamima an undeserving adult woman – rather than the child she was – and reveal that the entitlements of her citizenship were conditional on her good behaviour. Citizenship was regarded as a gift bestowed upon Shamima by the fair play nation that is Britain, a gift that she failed to adequately appreciate and therefore would now be punished through its removal.

In contrast, the Windrush scandal led to a very public outcry spearheaded by newspapers including the *Daily Mail*, who described it as a 'Fiasco that Shames Britain'.[18] In a letter to the *Independent*, Michael Mann from Shrewsbury wrote about his 'feeling of shame' at the treatment of those victimised by the scandal.[19] Sajid Javid described the Windrush generation as 'outstanding pillars of the community' who 'came to help rebuild this country' after the Second World War.[20] The Windrush generation have come to embody ideas of deserving immigrants: those who have arrived legally and behaved honourably. Unfortunately, this view rests on a particularly egregious denial of the white racial panic in response to post-1945 immigration from the Caribbean, East Africa and South Asia, facilitating acrobatic revisions of British history. The lived reality of the hostile reception which faced black and brown commonwealth subjects upon their arrival in Britain was vicious anti-Black racism and 'Paki' bashing.[21]

Regardless of this pertinent history, images of the SS Empire Windrush arriving at Tilbury docks in 1948 adorned coverage of the scandal. The use of these images represented a backwards glance at a sanitised and romanticised history of misty-eyed migrants from the Caribbean hoping to start a new life in the hallowed streets of the 'motherland'. In the context of these images, feelings of national shame emanate from an understanding of Britain as a fair-minded and tolerant nation which once opened its doors to hardworking immigrants but is now betraying these ideals. The scandal facilitated the resignation of Javid's predecessor, home secretary Amber Rudd over the 'justifiable outrage' surrounding the deportations and the fact that she lied to a Select Committee over the existence of removal targets.[22] The Commonwealth Citizen's Taskforce (CCT) was also established to assist those who had been wrongly affected by legislation ostensibly aimed at undocumented migrants.

Robbie Shilliam has argued that distinctions between who is 'deserving' and who is 'undeserving' are integral to the production of the ongoing racial and class insecurity experienced by postcolonial citizens.[23] He shows how these distinctions emerged from attempts to make hierarchies between diverse populations subjected to British

colonial rule.[24] From Manchester, to Bombay, Nairobi and Sydney, the subjects of the British Empire were to be found everywhere from Asia, Africa, North America and Oceania. Theoretically all British subjects, wherever they lived, shared universal rights including the right to enter the United Kingdom. These claims of equality between British subjects in colonies, dominions and mandates were intended to project an idea of imperial unity and underline the liberal character of British colonialism.

In practice this was not the case, however, and there were all kinds of racial, class-based and gendered ways in which the theoretical equality between British subjects was exposed as an exercise in rhetorical piety. For instance, white settler colonies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa agitated to discriminate against British subjects of colour entering these territories through immigration and nationality laws. Similarly, within the UK, degrees of belonging first to the empire and later to the nation were determined by ideas about which subjects were deserving or undeserving depending on the racialized and class characteristics attributed to them.

To bring this back to the present, despite being positioned as either 'deserving' or 'undeserving' both Begum and Jameson remain locked outside of Britain with limited recourse to challenging their removal from the nation. In other words, while one has been cast as a worthy recipient of justice and the other not, the material consequences of being made 'deserving' and 'undeserving' remain surprisingly similar. These equivalent experiences of disentitlement and its harms are further underscored by the Windrush victims continued struggle for justice. For example, in 2021 the *Guardian* reported that the compensation scheme set up to assist victims of Windrush (which cannot be claimed by those with a criminal conviction) has only paid out to 864 of the 15,000 people who were eligible to apply.[25]

Alexandra Ankrah, a Black Home Office employee working on the compensation scheme, resigned in protest at the treatment of Black and Asian victims. She described the scheme as 'systemically racist and unfit for purpose'.[26] The same Home Office employees who had been responsible for the plight facing postcolonial citizens were suddenly expected to assist people whose lives they had made unliveable. Furthermore,

the low pay-outs themselves did not fairly compensate for the levels of financial hardship provoked by job losses, ill health and the denial of access to welfare benefits. The 'complete lack of humanity' with which Home Office workers treated claimants suggest the systemic problems remain.[27] We can see that the rhetorical distinction made between the 'deserving' Windrush generation and 'undeserving' Muslims has not translated into just treatment from the British state.

Imperial amnesia: forgetting about 'race' and racism.

Grappling with Prevent and the hostile environment as projects of racial bordering which operate to keep Britain white cannot be understood or resisted without also delving more deeply into colonial histories of 'race' and racism. However, this task is complicated by the twin forces of colonial amnesia (how we 'forget' aspects of British colonial history) and nostalgia (how we remember aspects of British colonial history). Colonial amnesia and nostalgia are central to the kinds of stories we tell ourselves about what Britain is and what it means to be British. This is why amnesia and nostalgia have been the subjects of fevered discussion precipitated in large part by the 2016 referendum on EU membership.

Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever have argued that Brexit was driven by nostalgia for the empire and the desire to rejuvenate Britain as a proud global power by 'taking back control' over its borders and keeping out undeserving populations.[28] While these debates are well-traversed elsewhere, this is a judicious moment to revisit the centrality of 'race' and racism in British history. It is only through a reckoning with this history that we can grasp how postcolonial citizens are made insecure through counter-terrorism practices and immigration regimes working to keep Britain white. But these histories must first be understood as part of the global advent of European colonialism which began in earnest around the fifteenth century.

The science of 'race' was a core aspect of European colonialism, though this idea remains controversial. While racism in contemporary liberal democracies is often regarded as an individualised pathology or a matter of persons with biases who behave in a discriminatory fashion,

the history of race-making as a means through which European powers enslaved and occupied colonised people tells a rather different story. The inability of Western liberal democracies to recognise the historical and structural aspects of racial violence is tied to the rise and persistence of social movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM activists and supporters draw attention to the long-standing, wide-ranging and cyclical nature of the struggles faced by Black, Indigenous and other people of colour in the United States and elsewhere including Britain. This is because, as Alana Lentin points out, processes of race-making were central to the formation of European empires and their white settler colony offspring:

> the race concept is born of the possibilities opened up by Enlightenment methodologies; most importantly the capacity to order and classify, to rationalize everything from immaterial objects to plants, animals and human beings themselves [...] Race develops into a fully evolved system for the hierarchical ranking of humanity, from superior white to inferior black, over a long period of 200 years. This process, which leads finally to the 'Golden Age of Racism' of the late nineteenth century, is an emphatically political one.[29]

'Race' and racism not only helped divide up the world for conquest by European empires but also simultaneously cemented ideas of white superiority, authority and entitlement. Hamid Dabashi argues that Frantz Fanon's injunction that 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World' does not simply refer to the theft of raw materials or transfers of wealth which powered European 'development' and impoverished the Global South.[30] It also refers to the very possibility of 'Europe' imagined as a civilised and civilising force presiding over an array of racialised others located elsewhere.

Through the processes of colonisation, European empires came to decide on who did and did not count as human, who could and could not be civilised. Through regimes of racial classification, colonising powers were able to turn humans into property to be traded for slavery, to dispossess indigenous people of their land on the basis that they

were too 'savage' to cultivate it, and to perpetrate genocide. While there was substantial variation between and within European empires, what brought together particularistic practices of empire-craft was a shared commitment to ideas of white superiority, authority and entitlement. Whether upholding what cheerleader of British imperialism Rudyard Kipling called the 'white man's burden' or undertaking a *mission civilisatrice* to bring Christianity to indigenous peoples, the science of race provided an inexhaustible supply of knowledge that could be used by Europeans to remake and dominate the world.

David Theo Goldberg contends that these understandings of 'race' and racism have been excised from Europe through what he terms as 'political racelessness'.[31] The history of Europe is often told as the history of the European Union: a narrative of ever closer integration understood as a wholly 'internal' process without reference to or recognition of the histories of colonialism to which racialized notions of 'Europe' and the accumulation of European wealth were indebted. Goldberg argues that political 'racelessness' is embodied in the treatment of the Holocaust as 'the referent point for "race" in Europe'.[32] In particular, Goldberg argues that delinking the Holocaust from a wider global pattern of European colonialism has contributed to the erasure of histories of colonialism.

The genocidal violence of Nazi death camps was deemed internal to Europe, and has been seen as rooted in European soil. But, as the Martiniquan thinker and political activist Aimé Césaire argues, Nazism was a 'boomerang effect' of practices of racial violence already happening in European colonies across the world.[33] The historian Isabel Hull notes that the Imperial German army had engaged in acts of internment and genocide in Southwest Africa (modern day Namibia) against the Herero and Nama tribes.[34] This is where what Elizabeth Baer calls the 'genocidal gaze' was honed, premised on the dehumanisation of African populations. For Baer this logic was later replicated in the Nazi holocaust and extended to the devastation of Europe's Jewish populations.[35] As Goldberg summarises,

> Colonialism [. . .] is considered to have taken place elsewhere, outside of Europe, and so is thought to be the history properly speaking not of Europe. Colonialism, on this view, has had little or no effect in the making of Europe itself, or of European nation-states. And its targets were solely the indigenous far removed from European soil.[36]

This reasoning leads Goldberg to conclude that there can be no thoroughgoing account of how 'race' and racism continues to structure the EU's responses to the so-called 'refugee crisis' or its border policies in the Mediterranean and North Africa. For Gurminder Bhambra, the 'refugee crisis' is in fact a crisis *of Europe* rather than a crisis *in Europe*.[37] The European context teaches us that the silencing of colonial history and its racism(s) is sustained through temporal (it happened in the past) and spatial (it happened elsewhere) dimensions. These silences also serve to obscure how the fates of people from formerly colonised spaces, whether they are already citizens of European states or attempting to attain this status, are entwined through border regimes located both outside and inside Europe. Furthermore, the refusal to acknowledge the continued power of colonial legacies in the operations of the EU obstructs debates about responsibility, reparation and justice for historic and ongoing racial violence committed in the name of Europe and its borders.

The erasure of colonial histories and their indebtedness to racism is also relevant in the British context. Historians Alan Lester, Katie Boehme and Peter Mitchell have argued that the British Empire is often construed as 'a better empire than all the others' because it was seen by those governing it (and later by those studying it), to be rooted in ideas of freedom, civilisation and liberalism.[38] To this end, it was seen as 'preferable to the alternatives at a time of rampant European imperialism' because it was an all-together 'less vicious empire than all the others'.[39] While many European empires unabashedly invoked race science in justifying their imperial pursuits, in Britain ideas of 'moderation' served to conceal the depth of racial violence both 'epistemic and physical' animating its brand of colonialism.