The Rushdie affair has revealed a deep crisis in Britain's social fabric. It is about a struggle for identity and a stake in our cultural life.

Homi I'd like to start by looking at the notion of the 'sacred' because I thought that was a central issue in the Rushdie affair. You have talked, Bhikhu, about the sacred as that which is beyond utilitarian considerations, and has an intrinsic or non-instrumental significance. I understood you to be saying by this that the sacred is a category which stands between East and West. It's not religion in a narrow sense, but it is the symbols, values and qualities of life that hold a community together. But around the Satanic Verses crisis, for instance in Bradford, what is sacred has evolved through local politics, debates around education and power structures within the Muslim community.

Bhikhu If you are suggesting that the sacred can be chartered in the service of economic and political causes, I readily agree. In Iran it has been systematically used to silence opposition and to mobilise the masses in the interest of a specific economic and political system. The same is the case in Britain. The Muslims, even the most devout ones, do not live by religion alone. The mullahs, as well as the so-called progressive Muslim leaders who act as brokers between the state and their community, have a good deal to gain by encouraging their followers to define themselves primarily in religious terms. This is one way they can retain their power base and attract money from British and international sources.

Several surveys have shown that a substantial section of Muslim youth in Britain do not approve of separate Muslim schools and the religious definition and concomitant restraints that are imposed on them. This makes it all the more urgent for those with vested interests to raise the cry of Islam or Islamic values being in danger.

Bhikhu Parekh: 'Muslims are being increasingly de-Islamified'

But I also had in mind a slightly different notion of the sacred. The self is not a substance nor an automatic process, but an unending act of self-enactment. It is necessarily defined and developed in the context of the individual's relations to nature and to society. The immigrant is faced with an acute problem here. Let me give a personal example. I grew up in India. That growing up with a certain sense of smell, climate, sounds, views, a and a specific pattern of social relationships and expectations. When I came to Britain that natural context was lost and, since I did not 'live' within the immigrant community, the social context was also lost. I found myself becoming an abstract 'I', left with little more than a bundle of detached and increasingly empty memories. I had to recreate a new self out of the old one and my newly-acquired experiences and sensibilities. It is this painful process of self-creation and giving a meaning to my life that I consider deeply sacred.

Most immigrants proceed along a different route. They live together and rely on collective historical memories and images to counter their increasing self-alienation. Unlike personal memories, historical memories are objective, institutionalised in traditions, beliefs and practices. They become a source of meaning, a way of guarding against insanity and of providing some social and cultural depth. They also relate you to others, both in Britain and the countries of your origin, keeping alive the idea of an eventual 'return'. Immigrants often buy land in their home countries with a view to eventually returning there to 'bury their bones' or spend their old age.

Homi I very much want to stress this notion of cultural displacement, because I think another important issue in the Satanic Verses is the doubt, guilt and self-questioning that emerges from this displacement. But it is very important to see that the immigrant's experience of culture and their construction of identity becomes a hybrid. The return to home, the return to a religion, must be seen not as something that comes from the past, but that is also being reproduced here within a different framework. It's the past in the present.
and is something new. Using the context of a magical-realist book, a postmodern fiction, to raise questions of the sacred, is a new form of an originary culture.

People have misunderstood this. They just think that old-sounding, or archaic beliefs must somehow be relegated to an archaic past. I think that’s wrong: it leads one to imagine demands as somehow irrelevant to modern society, when these are wholly contemporary demands. Bhikhu It has always struck me that the ‘cyclical’ theory of time comes very easily to an immigrant. There is a past, which one recreates in a new environment and to which the present bears little relation. That leads to self-fragmentation, a painful state which one copes with by hoping that the present is only an aberration and that the future will either reconcile the past and present, or represent a happy return to the romanticised past.

You're other point is also well taken: what you recreate in a new environment is never the same as what you left behind. What was a richly-nuanced body of beliefs and practices gets abbreviated into a set of abstract formulae, and a tradition degenerates into an ideology. It’s in that context that I would like to understand so-called fundamentalism. Every civilisation rejuvenates itself periodically by returning to its past, recapturing its central principles and reinterpreting them in the light of the present. The basic principles obviously cannot be revived in their pristine form, but they do guide choices, give confidence and anchor and preserve a sense of continuity. This is what happened during the Renaissance and the Reformation.

When however, a group feels besieged and afraid of losing its past in exchange for a nebulous future, it lacks the courage to critically reinterpret its fundamental principles, lest it opens the door to ‘excessive’ reinterpretation. It then turns its fundamentals into fundamentalism, it declares them inviolate and reduces them to a neat and easily-enforceable package of beliefs and rituals. I might also say that sometimes fundamentalism is the only available source of a counter-hegemonic discourse.

All of us, in our traditional settings, take lots of things about ourselves for granted. We are constantly growing and changing without being aware of it. The immigrant’s predicament is different, especially for someone easily distinguishable by their colour or culture. Partly because of the conscious or unconscious pressure of an inhospitable society, partly because of their own sense of unease, they feel forced to define themselves, to say to others and even to themselves, who they are, what constitutes their identity or claim to distinction. So to be a Hindu or a Muslim is to do a, b, and c, and to reject x, y, or z. And this self-definition then becomes a norm to which all members of a specific group are required to conform. In the process its history, traditions, memories, even geography get badly mutilated: clearly evident in the Muslim self-definition in Britain. The Satanic Verses has both helped and hindered the process.

Homi The Satanic Verses, of course, provides a whole replay of that problem of the incommensurability - the impossibility of comparison - of different kinds of cultural positions. It’s a book written from the midst of such confusions, and it plays with hybrid identities. But your last point also leads us to the question of how to understand a migrant, post-industrial culture, which is what Britain is today. The question that is often posed is: What do you people want? It is both a question about individual identities and through an ambivalent and antagonistic process.

We’re challenged by the Satanic Verses crisis to face something very deep: that perhaps our models of the social contract, or of harmonious or organic society, should be rethought in terms of the reality of contestation and challenge within co-existing cultural systems. We all recognise the problems with those myths that said if you have a class solidarity then in some way cultural differences will disappear; or if you focus on the issues of race or gender, once we’ve resolved these inequities we can have a more harmonious and socialistic society. None of these social differences are in

Homi Bhabha: ‘Our models of harmonious society should be rethought’

Homi: 'We have seen elements of the liberal tradition buckle under the strain of questions of cultural difference'
Bhikhu I think modernity is caught up in the crisis of its own success. The post-Enlightenment worldview, which through imperialism was foisted upon large parts of the world, has become the dominant paradigm: based on a specific view of the individual, of material interests, of rights, obligations and so on. What modernity has done is to marginalise, destroy, obliterate, or simply laugh out of existence, a large variety of worldviews, creating a flat, barren world. And I mean here not only the lived world, but also the world of ideas and sensibilities. Is there a release from this highly clausrophobic post-Enlightenment worldview? I would argue that the wide variety of cultures which continue to exist, and still mercifully have some vitality left in them, ought to be encouraged and be brought into a creative and equal dialogue with modernity.

You also talked just now about conflict of cultures. I would prefer to talk not so much about cultures, as about ethnic groups, because a culture derives its strength from the group of people who live it, revitalise it, face its problems and sustain it as an integral part of their way of life. However there is a constant tendency to de-ethnicise people. In the United States people look upon themselves as Italian-American, Irish-American and so on, such that the integrity of an ethnic group is accepted, and it negotiates its differences with other groups within an over-arching polity. In Britain the culture of the middle-class Englishman is accepted as the dominant culture. This society has an immensely powerful assimilationist thrust, which I have not seen in any other society, except in France. Britain has never been able to rule successfully over a multicultural society, not even during its imperial days. Not surprisingly Britain is not able to handle multiculturalism now.

There is a tendency to think of immigrants not as groups, as rich ways of life, but only as collections of individuals. They are constantly attacked for forming ghettos and lacking the courage and the maturity to live as individuals. The language of individualism conceals a most insidious form of racism. An immigrant culture survives as long as it is embedded in the lifestyle of a group. Once you begin to break it up into individuals, you de-ethnicise them, break up a powerful unit, deprive people of their roots. At another level, where an Englishman talks about individualism, he's being dishonest. He can talk about being an individual, because he is already grounded in his own ethnic way of life. So it really amounts to individualism for the immigrants, some form of ethnic collectivism for the British society.

Hemi Absolutely, there is no way of thinking through how a group comes to be constituted. The group identity is something threatening. We are seeing this today in responses to this issue: the ethnic group is the worst of all evils, so let us draw out of it enlightened individuals, and let us turn others who are articulating their cultural differences into enlightened individuals. I agree with you that it is by asserting the way in which ethnic groupings or communities express their cultural differences, that we can confront the 'subject' of liberalism. But I have a doubt over how far tradition can be seen as part of the living reality of the ethnic group? How far can these symbols and images of continuity - from food to celebrations of festivals, initiation rituals etc. - provide a sense of unity? Or whether traditions as they're being reconstituted now, are not themselves always subject to destruction through fragmentation? And if that is so, don't you think we need to begin to think about the boundaries of ethnicity? They keep something in but they also open something out, and at the limits of the group, there is always a deep ambivalence, explored through Rosa Di-

Rosa Diamond stands for a fragmented Britishness - her anchoring 'memories' are of the Battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror, that kind of thing - and then into her garden on the south coast from an exploded Boeing, falls this Indian actor, Gibreel. Even when dressed in her husband's borrowed clothes, he is very obviously unlike Sir Henry Diam-

Hemi Yes, but it's precisely that boundary which is both firm and open. It really becomes the crunch point. There are times at that point of which I call cultural difference (as opposed to cultural diversity) where the two kinds of difference, that ambivalence of colonial rule, the incompatibility of being a despot and a democrat. Of course Mill justified it, by saying that there are certain cultures - and this is exactly what is being said today - that never become integrated into modernity and civility. Such an ambivalence within the rationality of the Enlightenment should be our starting point in reconstructing the basis of Western liberal thought and its notion of civilisation.

Bhikhu Liberalism has always remained assimilationist: others must be constituted. The group identity is something threatening. We are seeing this today in responses to this issue: the ethnic group is the worst of all evils, so let us draw out of it enlightened individuals, and let us turn others who are articulating their cultural differences into enlightened individuals. I agree with you that it is by asserting the way in which ethnic groupings or communities express their cultural differences, that we can confront the 'subject' of liberalism. But I have a doubt over how far tradition can be seen as part of the living reality of the ethnic group? How far can these symbols and images of continuity - from food to celebrations of festivals, initiation rituals etc. - provide a sense of unity? Or whether traditions as they're being reconstituted now, are not themselves always subject to construction through fragmentation? And if that is so, don't you think we need to begin to think about the boundaries of ethnicity? They keep something in but they also open something out, and at the limits of the group, there is always a deep ambivalence, explored through Rosa Diamond in The Satanic Verses.

Rhod Canal - he is a migrant imposter. By taking the place of her husband, he de-values the imperialist authority of Sir Henry, steeped in its paternalism and pandy. This seems to liberate Rosa into recalling a ragbag of personal memories, drawn from a wide range of cultures completely unlike her previously-anchored pure British past. And during this process the two people become bound together in a way unlike a previous colonial relationship of master and servant.

Rushdie is pointing up how ethnicities are social constructions. That process of self-identification in a post-colonial setting requires a historical narrative which is fractured, discontinuous.

Bhikhu I argue we should not see ethnicity as fixed and unchanging. Historically-speaking, every community has felt forced to accept change, to at least come to terms with other communities. The question is, when do communities become frozen? When do they say that they will not change any more? I think that happens when they feel besieged, threatened, when no space is left for them to grow. And this is where multiculturalism becomes extremely important.

Multiculturalism doesn't simply mean numerical plurality of different cultures, but rather a community which is creating, guaranteeing, encouraging spaces within which different communities are able to grow and flourish. At the same time it means creating a public space in which these communities are able to interact, enrich the existing culture and create a new consensual culture in which they recognise reflections of their own identity.

And education is critically important here. In this country, multicultural education is becoming a terrain where the Muslims have mounted a most vigorous campaign for their survival and growth. Although their cultural identity is not being openly assaulted - in fact they are being pampered at one level, government ministers will go to their mosque and tell them how wonderful they are - they know that this is merely the periphery of their existence. When it comes to the substance of political life in this country, quietly in our schools, through the instrumentality of teachers, through the curriculum, the school ethos and so on, Muslims are being increasingly de-Islamified and gradually sucked into the dominant culture. And that is the terrain where the struggle is going to take place in the next few years.

I think that multiculturalism is possible, but only if communities feel confident enough to engage in a dialogue and when there is enough public space for them to interact with the dominant culture. So I am taking not a wholly open-ended view of ethnicity, but one which is firm enough to hold itself together, and yet open enough to absorb external influences and make its own impact.

Hemi Right, but it's precisely that boundary which is both firm and open. It really becomes the crunch point. There are times at that point of which I call cultural difference (as opposed to cultural diversity) where the two kinds
of cultural practice grate against each other and a new practice is formed for which we have no settled rules of reference. That's a risk we have to take: cultural interaction might happen around a contentious hybrid issue which we cannot directly evaluate from past experience or even the political imperatives of the present. And it's that space which I feel is very important to acknowledge.

An instance comes to mind, which happened in May 1817 under a tree outside New Delhi. According to the earliest Christian converted catechist, the Christian mission was told that a number of people dressed in white were reading a bible under the tree. The Indian catechist goes off and asks them: 'What are you reading?' And they say, 'We are reading this book of God'. The catechist, hungry for conversions, asks: 'Well, don't you agree with it?' 'Yes', they reply, 'We agree with everything in it'. 'Then why don't you convert?' And they say, 'There is one major problem: your English sahibs eat meat, and we do not believe that the word of God can come from a meat-eater'. Now, the demand for a vegetarian bible is in that colonial context precisely this kind of incommensurable, hybrid object which emerges in moments of political negotiation. And it is very important in strategies of cultural survival, resistance and translation. That's the kind of moment we have to be particularly aware of: we do not have the rules of interpretation, but we must find a way of dealing with it, and of politically assessing it.

**Bhikhu** My own feeling is that while the tolerance of the hegemonic culture is important for different cultures to grow, it is always tolerance concede within the dominant framework. Space is often not given - it has to be taken. You have to create it, and when a group of people appears to be intolerant, to be demanding that the established norms be opened up a little, it is also a demand to create a space in which a dialogue is possible.

One also ought not to forget the importance of economic considerations. The assimilationist thrust is inherent in capitalism. It cannot tolerate diversity beyond a certain point, it insists on uniformity, it insists on only those differences that it can regulate. The kind of relaxed dialogue that we are talking about is only possible in an economic system which allows differences, and creates equal opportunities for different groups to grow. I should have thought that some kind of socialist economy is inescapable for this dialogue to take place.

**Heitli** Absolutely, but a socialist economy which keeps open the tension of unresolved differences. If we don't have a cultural political economy which recognizes difference, I think all we will be doing is exchanging one set of liberal sacred cows for another set of socialist sheep.

**Homi** Just to add one final short point to that: one of the ways in which both the liberal establishment and indeed the marxist establishment would be able to open themselves up would be by returning in a much more experimental and innovative way to the moment which is a blind spot for both their histories; that is, the cultural context of colonialism. To see that as being as much of an apparatus of modernity as the notion of civility, progress or law. To see the colonial moment as indeed the history of the West, and to listen through that to those indigenous or native peoples who had to make sense of a foreign system and survive within it and resist it.