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A Sunbeam of Hope: Negotiations of Identity and Belonging among Pakistanis in Denmark

Mikkel Rytter

This article discusses how notions of identity and belonging are negotiated between generations within Pakistani families in Denmark. Presenting the case of A Sunbeam of Hope, a stage play written and performed by members of the Organisation of Pakistani Students and Academics (OPSA), I discuss how the aspirations and experiences related to the process of migration differ in the older and younger generations of Pakistanis. The play is about a migrant family that returns to Pakistan for the summer holidays and the ways in which individual family members are confronted with their relatives, their origins and their common national history. Using stereotypes as an artistic effect, the play levels a severe critique of the parental generation and expresses a strong element of self-criticism among the educated youngsters. The play is analysed in relation to the changing structure of Pakistani migrants’ families, the specific historical development of OPSA and the socio-political context of Denmark in general.

Keywords: Family Migration; Pakistani Minority; Generation; Drama; Islam; Denmark

When migrant families, such as Pakistanis in Denmark, have lived in the West for several decades, they may no longer share well-defined ideas concerning who they are and where they belong. On the contrary, notions of identity and belonging become sites for intergenerational conflict and contestation. Disagreements between generations are sometimes articulated in terms of national categories or discourses, e.g. whether family members should be more or less Pakistani or more or less Danish, but they can also be experienced through other ascribed markers such as ethnicity, religion or place of origin. Engagement in transnational social fields has made it possible for Pakistani migrants to imagine themselves as belonging to several different
communities and configurations of identity. The aim of this article is to discuss how identities are managed and evaluated very differently by older and younger members of Pakistani migrant families.

In order to explore how identity and belonging are negotiated between generations, I discuss a stage play—*A Sunbeam of Hope*—performed by members of the Organisation of Pakistani Students and Academics (OPSA) in Denmark to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the foundation of Pakistan as an independent nation-state. The characters and actions of the fictive migrant family on stage will be treated as a performance that addresses common problematic features of family life. I suggest that the play launched a public, intergenerational critique not easily articulated or accepted within Pakistani and Muslim family structures that are informed by the values of parental respect and authority. The play enabled OPSA members and the audience to question how first-generation migrants have (mis)managed their Pakistani identity and cultural heritage while living in Denmark; it also made it possible to imagine other potential claims to identity and belonging.¹

**Negotiating Identity**

The literature on migration has increased markedly in recent decades, producing a large number of studies on how the movement of people from poorer to richer countries affects local, national and international economies, labour markets and politics. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in how to sustain family relations across borders. Studies of ‘the transnational family’ (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Olwig 2007; Sørensen 2005) have focused on intimate spheres of family life, and considered how migrants maintain a notion of home (Olwig 1997), how transnational households are organised (Grillo and Gardner 2002), and how separated migrant women and their children practise and experience ‘transnational motherhood’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997) or ‘transnational childhood’ (Anderson 1998; Olwig 1999). Many studies have analysed the impact and importance of ‘transnational marriages’ in terms of sustaining family and kinship networks despite distances in time and space (Ballard 1990; Charsley 2005, 2006; Charsley and Shaw 2006; Constable 2004; Rytter 2009; Shaw 2001; Werbner 1990). Even though these works represent just a small proportion of studies of migrant families, they all form part of the ‘transnational turn’ in migration studies (Glick Schiller *et al*. 1995).

Transnationalism refers to lasting connections across borders, a common phenomenon in a global world in which multinational companies, political organisations, social movements and terrorist networks are engaged in activities simultaneously in a number of countries. Transnationalism thus refers to a border-crossing social field (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Olwig 2003). However, despite the promising idea to study family life and kinship networks simultaneously in separate but closely related places and spaces, it has been convincingly argued that the concept of transnationalism is biased by a methodological nationalism in which society is naturalised as fixed within the boundaries of the nation-state (Wimmer and
Glick Schiller 2003). In this way, the concept risks reproducing the same rigid notion of identity as political discourses of national integration in which migrants are presented as ‘matter out of place’. In the discourse of integration, migrants embody a national identity from their country of origin, which they are expected to abandon over time (often as quickly as possible) in favour of the national culture and identity of their new destination. The discourse reduces identity to a question of national sentiments and belonging. In a similar way, studies that use the concept of transnationalism risk ignoring the significant social and temporal processes through which identity configurations based on locality, ethnicity, race or religion are produced and contested along the lines of gender and generation within migrant families.

In her monograph on local politics among Pakistanis in Manchester, Pnina Werbner (2002) suggests a more encompassing and dynamic notion of identity, arguing that, when it comes to identity, solidarity and political mobilisation, the Pakistani community is transformed into a ‘segmented diaspora’. Depending on personal interests and the specific socio-political context, members of the migrant community can (must) choose to position themselves as ‘british-pakistani-muslim-punjabi-asian-black-mancunian-sunni-deobandi-jhelmi-gujar’ (Werbner 2002: 64, my emphasis). This multiplicity has its roots not only in recent migration to Britain, but in South Asia itself, where it is a legacy of successive imperial regimes and religious movements, population displacements, the modern rise of nationalism(s), post-colonial wars and religious hostilities, all of which have made the subcontinent a vast border zone of social actors bearing multiple and often contradictory identities (Werbner 2002: 58). The range of multiple local–national–transnational identities are not necessarily contradictory to people, but constitute a repertoire of identity and belonging which they can (or choose not to) mobilise through immediate or strategically planned ‘situational selection’ in different social contexts. Emphasising the same point, Qadeer explains that ‘A Pakistani in London is a Punjabi in Karachi, but a Saraiki-speaking Multani in Lahore’ (2007: 68). I am not suggesting a postmodern (nightmare) vision in which identity configurations are supposed to be free-floating and solely dependent on individual choice. On the contrary, the enactment of identities is dependent on the specific local context and the recognition of significant others.

However, despite the convincing idea that everyone has a repertoire of identities that can be mobilised in different social situations, we are still left with methodological and analytical challenges. When and how are certain identities in the range of possibilities performed and appreciated instead of others? When are you Mancunian and when do you become Punjabi? When do you identify as Deobandi and when do you present yourself as Muslim? It seems very unlikely that the range of possible identities is administered and evaluated in the same way by different members of a migrant family. On the contrary, insights from recent studies on ‘the transnational family’ call for empirical and analytical sensitivity in order to understand how positions, strategies and relations of power are produced and
contested within migrant families along the lines of gender, age, migration history, education, religiosity, economic capacity or political conviction. In this article, I apply an intergenerational approach in order to grasp how the range of identities is enacted and contested within Pakistani migrant families in Denmark.

Pakistanis in Denmark

The first Pakistanis came to Denmark in the late 1960s and early 1970s as ‘guestworkers’. In 1973 the Danish government banned further labour-related immigration but, after Denmark entered the European Community in 1973, a couple of thousand Pakistanis arrived there from the UK, motivated by good job opportunities, the generous welfare system of social benefits and the liberal national legislation on family reunification with spouses from Pakistan. However, the most important source of continued immigration was established workers sending for their wives and children and settling more or less permanently in Denmark. Today approximately 25,000 people residing in Denmark have a family history related to Pakistan, including Danish, British and Pakistani citizens. It is estimated that approximately 75 per cent originate from villages in the Gujrat district of rural Punjab (Quraishy 1999) which, as most Pakistanis in Norway originate from the same area (Østberg 2003), is often referred to as ‘Little Scandinavia’. As a consequence of the relatively short history of immigration, the group mainly consists of one generation of migrants—born and raised in Pakistan—and their children, born and raised in Denmark.

Pakistanis constitute a small but heterogenous community within the Copenhagen area. Due to economic recession, many poorly educated migrants lost their jobs in the late 1970s and 1980s. Instead they started private businesses—small groceries (kiosks), travel agencies and catering firms—or became taxicab owners. These businesses were run and financed by local networks of trusted friends, fellow villagers and members of the extended family (Hjarnø 2000). The development of these occupational niches among Pakistanis has made many families well-off economically.

The second generation distinguishes itself through achievements in the free educational system in the Danish welfare state. The educational level of the second generation is almost equivalent to that of the average Danish peer group (Colding 2005; Moldenhawer 2005). This leap in upward social mobility is quite remarkable, given the limited education of the parents.

In the 1980s and 1990s, more than 80 per cent of marriages among Danish-Pakistanis were contracted with spouses from Pakistan (Schmidt and Jacobsen 2000: 144). But new rules of family reunification introduced in 2000 and 2002 have made it difficult, if not virtually impossible, for people categorised as immigrants to obtain family reunification, regardless of their citizenship (Hervik and Rytter 2004; Rytter 2007, 2009). Stimulated by the new regime of immigration control, a recent trend has been to ‘arrange’ marriages between families in Denmark; the latest survey shows that more than 40 per cent of young Pakistani engagements and marriages are contracted
with someone already living in Denmark (Schmidt and Jacobsen 2004: 111). Due to these significant aspects of their common history and the recent trend towards intermarriage, Pakistani families in Denmark have become closely interrelated through overlapping networks of affinity, friendship, politics, education, business or religious activity. The result is a village-like community where it is generally believed that ‘everyone knows everyone else’.

Over the years, Pakistani families living in Denmark have tried to maintain intimate relations with people and places in Pakistan through various transnational practices, such as communication, visits, remittances, investments in land and the erection of houses on family land. Transnational arranged marriages have been an important means to maintain or create relations with extended family networks and Pakistan generally. These numerous activities may leave the impression that family members act as a unit and that everyone has the same interest in maintaining transnational relations. This is not the case: profound disagreement about the importance and significance of transnational connections is found in many families. Pakistan simply means something different to the two generational cohorts.

**Family Life, Authority and Respect**

Members of the first generation of Pakistanis in Denmark are now growing old. Many suffer from health problems related to ageing, and some have already passed away. Meanwhile members of the second generation are getting married and establishing their own households. The structural transitions from ‘child’ to ‘parent’ or from ‘parent’ to ‘grandparent’ involve processes of self-reflection, in which the young contrast their own values, expectations of life, relations with family and kin and hopes for the future with those of their parents. This re-positioning within family cycles often makes latent disagreements and differences come into the open. In her study of Pakistanis in Oxford, Shaw (2000: 93) discusses the structure and dynamics of migrant families:

> The ideals governing relationships between family members, generally expressed by all, but sometimes challenged by the younger generations, include a formal hierarchy within which each person has a clearly defined role, determined by age and sex, in relation to other family members. [...] Communication between men is formal and men are not supposed to smoke, talk freely or joke in the presence of their older brothers or father: they should always be respectful and deferential.

This resembles the code of conduct found in many Pakistani families in Denmark. The claim of respect for the family, parents and older people is part of Islamic tradition, and is therefore often reproduced as an unquestionable part of what it means to be Pakistani and a good Muslim (Østberg 2003: 157). The hierarchy and claim for respect often create a distance between grown-up children and their parents. Many youngsters, for instance, find it extremely difficult to discuss personal problems...
with their parents, especially their father. Instead young people may consult their mother, a trusted uncle or perhaps an older brother or sister.

An important aspect of the code of conduct is not to criticise the opinions or actions of one’s parents in public. Impudent or bold behaviour by a son or daughter will often be interpreted as a sign of a failed upbringing, questioning the ability of the parents to raise their children properly. Stories of disrespectful youngsters are a major theme in the ongoing gossip within the Pakistani community. The family structure makes it very difficult for members of the younger generation to articulate any dissatisfaction they may experience with their parents or families or with their lives in general.

In social contexts solely composed of young Pakistanis, everyone is much more outspoken about parental values that seem silly, old-fashioned or exotic to them. It is not uncommon to joke about stubborn parents who do nothing but praise their zaat (clan) origin, tell anecdotes about life back in the village, gossip about their neighbours or discuss local Pakistani politics. This kind of joking relationship between youngsters is affectionate regarding the cultural idiosyncrasies of the parents, but it also exposes the gap between the two generational cohorts.

**Organisation of Pakistani Students and Academics (OPSA)**

One site in which differences between the older and younger generations have become salient is that of Pakistani associations and organisations in Denmark. The Organisation of Pakistani Students and Academics (OPSA) was founded in 1993 by merging two existing student associations, of Pakistani medical students (POM) and Pakistani students of engineering (SPI). The aim was to form an effective youth organisation for all Pakistani students in Denmark that could become an important actor in the local community and the wider Danish society.

Since the early 1970s, there have been numerous Pakistani associations in Denmark focusing on politics, religion or cultural activities, and different ‘societies’ have recruited members from specific geographical areas or from certain zaat. From the outset, OPSA was different. First of all, OPSA was not oriented toward Pakistan. Instead its explicit aim was—to quote its former chairman, Mazhar Hussain—to ‘organise young Pakistanis and integrate them into the Danish society’. Secondly, OPSA wanted to ‘unite young Pakistanis, despite the political, social, cultural, geographical, ethnic and religious boundaries that divided the organisations and the generation of their parents’ (Rytter 2003a: 142). These ambitions were met with great suspicion from the wider community but, for several years, OPSA succeeded in doing just that.

At its height, OPSA had more than 200 paying members, and reached many more by arranging public events. The organisation represented a ‘free’ space in which it was possible to reverse the negative stigma of being part of an ethnic minority in Danish society. During its early years, OPSA held several public debates on politics, religion, education, health and employment issues, and for three years published its own
monthly magazine. In 2000 OPSA created a website where members and non-members could discuss shared interests in topics such as family, culture, marriage, Islam, Bollywood movies, poetry etc. OPSA also successfully arranged a number of ‘family shows’, such as the one discussed in this article, held in August 2002 to celebrate the foundation of Pakistan as an independent nation-state.

‘A Sunbeam of Hope’

The family show was held in the assembly hall of a state school in Ballerup, a suburb of Copenhagen. The announcement of the event as a ‘family show’ indicated that it was a social occasion at which nothing offensive, such as public dancing, would take place. Being a public event and a celebration of Pakistan’s national day, the 350 + guests dressed up for the occasion, the women wearing vividly coloured dresses, the men shirts, suits or shalwar kameez. The show lasted all afternoon and consisted of a quiz, a musical performance and several speeches given by prominent members of the Pakistani community. During the interval, refreshments were served. Everyone in the audience was in high spirits, and expectations built up concerning the climax of the afternoon, the performance of a play written and performed by members of OPSA for this particular occasion. After a 40-minute break, the audience returned to their seats, and there was a sudden hush as the lights in the assembly hall were dimmed.

The title of the play was A Sunbeam of Hope. Most of it was in Urdu and, as my understanding of Urdu is only fragmentary, I asked Hassan, an OPSA member in his early 30s, to be my interpreter. Hassan was no longer active in the organisation, since he had finished his education some years earlier, started working and married a young woman from Pakistan. They were attending the family show together with their two small children.

The narrative of the play was simple. A Pakistani migrant family from Denmark goes on holiday to the father’s native village in ‘Little Scandinavia’. There, in Pakistan, they are confronted with family members they left behind, and the two Danish–Pakistani children learn where they come from and begin to understand the importance of their national and religious heritage.

For artistic effect, each character was presented as a stereotype reflecting the common dilemmas involved in migration and the difficulties of preserving family relations across distances in time and space. However, being performed by OPSA members on stage, the stereotypes caused much amusement and laughter. I will present each character in the play separately to elaborate on their stereotypical features.

The father calls himself ‘Charlie’. This is not the name he was given by his parents, but one he has been using for decades. According to Hassan it was not uncommon in the parents’ generation to take a new name when they first arrived in Denmark, as this indicates a change in personality, meaning that migrants present themselves as more Western or modern than before. Charlie is dressed in a multicoloured Hawaiian
shirt, with a vulgar tie and large sunglasses, and he continuously spends money, virtually throwing it around. Charlie has made his fortune driving a taxi in Copenhagen. By his dress and extravagance, the audience understands that Charlie sees himself as ‘a man of the world’. Nevertheless he is the stereotype of a *nouveau riche*, a man with lots of money but no sophistication.

The mother has no name: she is just presented as Charlie’s wife. In this subtle way, the playwrights question the gender roles of the older generation and the organisation of the patriarchal family in general, in which a woman may be defined through her husband.

During the play, the mother repeats two phrases. The first is ‘No problem, no problem’. The second is a jingle in Danish: ‘*Dagpenge, børnepenge, masser af penge*’—‘unemployment benefits, child maintenance support [awarded to all families with children in Denmark], and loads of money’. This jingle is reiterated over and over again and sounds almost like a calculation: ‘unemployment benefits’ plus ‘child maintenance support’ equals ‘lots of money’. Every time the mother repeated the jingle, the audience doubled up with laughter. The mother also considers herself a lady of distinction. Hassan explained that her dress and haircut were recognisable signs of her trying to be a more distinguished lady in Denmark than she used to be back in her village in Pakistan. Her ambition for social mobility is also made clear to the audience as she pretends to come from a higher-ranking *zaat* than she really does. In one scene after the family has returned to Pakistan, the mother is confronted by her own brother who, with disgust, asks her ‘Who do you think you are?’ She arrogantly replies: ‘I am modern!’

The teenage son speaks only Danish. He has never learned to speak his parents’ native tongue, and he does not care to. He is dressed in a hip-hop outfit and has bleached his hair. He repeatedly complains about spending his holiday in the village, and wishes instead that he had driven to Spain with his friends in their big Mercedes.

Unlike her brother, the teenage daughter speaks a little Urdu. Still, at the end of the play she has a long monologue in which she expresses her regret that she does not know Urdu and therefore is not able to understand her grandparents. Both children knew very little about their relatives in Pakistan before the holiday. This fact is revealed when the bewildered son confronts his father with the question: ‘Why have you never told us about our family and your native village?’

Charlie’s elderly father—the grandfather—is the teacher in the village. He is very surprised to learn that he has grandchildren, because he has never heard about them before. This informs the audience of the kind of relations (or lack of relations) between the family in Denmark and their relatives in Pakistan.

The grandmother has no dialogue but just sits in a wheelchair, being pushed around the stage by some of the other characters. A male OPSA member plays the part of the old lady, making the minor part an important comical contribution to the play.

The maternal uncle is a proud and idealistic man who acquired a university education in Pakistan. Despite the opportunity to emigrate, he has chosen to stay and
make an effort to help the country prosper. However, this decision is more idealistic than realistic, and he is therefore unemployed.

The play consisted of five acts, summarised as follows:

**Scene 1**

A chaotic scene in the international airport at Lahore. The family members from Denmark think they are being robbed of all their belongings, but it turns out to be two porters fighting to carry their luggage. After clearing up the misunderstanding, the porters are given generous tips by Charlie—there is money enough and tips for everyone.

**Scene 2**

The family arrives in the village, where we witness the reunion of Charlie and his aged parents. When his old mother sees him, she manages, despite a lot of difficulty, to get out of her wheelchair and go over to welcome her long-lost son. Charlie ignores the old woman because he does not recognise his own mother. Instead he approaches his father. This time the encounter is reversed and it is the old father who does not recognise his own son. However, the misunderstandings are cleared up and they all embrace each other.

Then the two teenage children enter the scene. Charlie introduces them to his father as mistakes—perhaps to excuse their Western attitude and language. The children are not in any way affected by meeting their grandparents for the first time. Instead they comment on the village, which they find dirty and disgusting. When the old grandfather understands that these two grown-up kids are his grandchildren, he greets them in a traditional way. As a respectable elder approaching a youngster, he wants to put his hands on their head. The children, on the other hand, misinterpret his gesture and respond by giving the old man a ‘high five’.

Finally Charlie’s wife enters the scene. She deliberately ignores the greetings of her parents-in-law and acts in a demonstratively arrogant manner towards them while constantly commenting on the heat and the smell, suggesting that they should buy an air-conditioner and so on. All her adult life she has been living in Denmark as Charlie’s wife, and through her bad manners and rude behaviour she deliberately violates the code of proper behaviour towards parents-in-law.

**Scene 3**

The third scene is built up around a series of monologues. First, the teenage son expresses his boredom at being in the village. Then the teenage daughter enters the stage, very upset at not knowing or understanding her own grandparents, and regretfully complaining that she apparently has nothing in common with them. We then see the old grandfather in despair, as he no longer knows his own son. In his
monologue, he relates the family story of how he had been the one who, years ago, wanted his son to leave Pakistan in order to make money and provide for the extended family, so that they could all improve their living conditions. Now he realises that emigration is not without consequences. The years in the West have changed his son: Charlie is no longer the son he used to be. Finally we see Charlie contemplate how difficult, maybe impossible, it would be for him to return to the village and to Pakistan in general. His long life in Denmark has made him a complete stranger to the simple life of his family and the village.

Scene 4

The mother’s brother enters the stage. Despite his education, he has not been able to find a job in Pakistan. Charlie and his wife suggest that he should go to the West and offer to help him. Nevertheless he rejects the offer and insists that Pakistan is the place for him to live. National patriotism is more important to him than money. Provoked by their offer, he confronts Charlie and asks him what all his money is worth when he is obviously embarrassed by his own parents and has lost his pride in the family, his village and in being Pakistani. Without expressing it directly, the mother’s brother poses the question ‘Does money make you happy?’

Final Scene

We see the grandfather—the old teacher of the village—sitting on a rock. By his side is one of his students, a young girl from the village. She asks him to relate the story of how Pakistan was created. He begins to tell the story of the struggle for independence, about the mass movements of people between India and Pakistan, of the violence and killings between Muslim, Sikh and Hindu during that period, and finally the partition and birth of Pakistan as an independent nation-state on 14 August 1947. As he relates the story, the two grandchildren pass by and are immediately captivated by their grandfather’s story, becoming absorbed by their Pakistani heritage, history and identity. The moral of the play is obvious: Charlie and his wife, representing the first generation, may have lost or deliberately distanced themselves from Pakistan, but their children, though born and raised in Denmark, can still learn a lot from their history, and should be proud of their Pakistani and Muslim background. The point is emphasised at the end, as the teenage boy promises his old grandfather in Danish that he will return to Pakistan. The curtain falls for the last time and the play ends.

Legitimate Intergenerational Criticism

The play met with a favourable reception. The audience laughed when they were supposed to and applauded for a long time after the final fall of the curtain. In general, everyone seemed to be having an enjoyable afternoon but, despite the fun
and laughter, the play also had a serious moral at the end. During the last scene, when the teenage boy reassured his old grandfather that he would return to Pakistan, Hassan looked at me and said ‘Boy, I don’t know how you feel about this … but I have goose bumps all over’. Judging from his immediate bodily reaction and the serious atmosphere in the audience, the narrative of the play made an impression.

Overall the play levelled severe criticism at the parental generation, represented by Charlie and his wife, who had forgotten their past and who they were before they settled in the West. However, the play also contained a strong element of self-criticism, in that the playwrights used the two teenagers to question the younger generation’s indifference regarding family relations, history and nationalist sentiments, criticism mediated by the stereotypical nature of the characters. According to Chock (1987: 348), stereotypes are ‘filled with rich, socially evocative, and culturally transmitted content of images, forms, tropes, and in the case of tropes, structures of relations that they state and explore and that are stated and explored in them in turn’. The use of stereotypes made it possible to explore artistically collective experiences and dilemmas of identity and belonging. Everyone in the audience knew someone—a father, friend or neighbour—who was more or less like Charlie, and some might even see aspects of him or some of the other characters in themselves. By turning each character into a stereotype, it became possible for both older and younger members of the audience to enjoy the performance and laugh at the characters, despite the fact that the play dealt with serious dilemmas from ‘real life’ in many families.

The play became a medium for an intergenerational critique because—like a mirror—it reflected dilemmas and conflicts of everyday family life, while ignoring conventions of privacy and delicacy when dealing with family problems. Normally it would be inappropriate at a ‘family show’ to violate the boundaries between the public and the private or the code of respect between the older and younger generations. Nevertheless this criticism was accepted because it took place within the fictitious setting of the play and on the specific occasion of the national day. In particular, the changing attitudes of the two teenage children saved the day. At the beginning they are spoiled and indifferent to their grandparents and uncle, but gradually they become eager to learn more about their family and Pakistan in general. Whereas Charlie and his wife might be lost, the next generation has a renewed longing to know about their family and heritage. The point is substantiated by the title A Sunbeam of Hope, with its promise for the future. The strong nationalist sentiments that filled the assembly hall at the end of the play meant that the provocative stereotypes and symbolic violations could be ignored.

To substantiate this interpretation, I will briefly mention an episode following the Eid show hosted by OPSA six months prior to the national day, at which a similar intergenerational critique was rejected. OPSA members had also produced a play on this occasion, dealing with the controversial topic of arranged marriages. The stage was set up as a ‘people’s court’, with a judge and two secretaries. In the performance, Amir, a young Pakistani man born and raised in Denmark, was accused of adultery.
The duty of the court was to decide who was to blame for Amir’s actions. The court called in a number of witnesses. First came the ‘Don Juan’-like figure of Amir, who explained that he had only agreed to the marriage in the first place to please his parents. Next on the witness stand was his highly independent wife from Pakistan, who was not prepared to put up with his adultery. Then the court called his father, who merely focused on the fact that his son and new daughter-in-law were from the same zaat. Then Amir’s loud and dominant mother was called, who was more than happy to get a daughter-in-law from Pakistan to do all the work in the household for her. Finally, the court called Amir’s secluded and indifferent sister, who was only interested in her studies and her looks.

On this occasion, too, the audience was amused by the plot and funny characters. After the witnesses had been put on the stand, the judge wanted to hear some reactions from the audience before reaching his verdict. Following his request, a few of the seniors present took the microphone and commented on the play and actions of the characters. In this way, the audience was included in the play as a kind of jury. Finally the judge pronounced his sentence, in which he strongly advised both parents and children to discuss openly the sometimes conflicting desires of marriage arrangements in order to avoid unsuitable matches like Amir’s in the future (Rytter 2003a).

In the weeks following the Eid show, OPSA was subjected to a great deal of criticism in the Pakistani community for bringing the topic of arranged marriages out into the open at a public gathering. It was not the sensitive topic of marriage or the stereotypical characters of the play that resulted in the critical reception afterwards, but the fact that the Eid show went beyond the physical limits of the stage by directly addressing the audience. In doing so, the boundaries of acceptable intergenerational criticism had been violated. The play transformed the relationship between the actors and the audience into an open dialogue between the older and younger generations, addressing the sensitive and private topic of marriage on a public occasion. This was not acceptable to many members of the older generation. Learning from this previous experience, OPSA abandoned the idea of having a discussion with the audience following A Sunbeam of Hope, instead letting the moral and critical remarks in the play speak for themselves.

Managing Identity

Pakistani migrants share a historically defined range of possible identities but, as the play suggests, the evaluation of these potentials differs between generations. OPSA used the performance of different stage plays to discuss the basic existential question of ‘Who are we?’ with their parents.

Both plays were sites for experimentation and the contestation of identity and belonging, where the audience was confronted with characters lost to Danish and Western values and attitudes, such as the indifferent children with no interest in Pakistan nor fluency in their native tongue, the promiscuity of Amir and the vanity of his sister, Charlie’s conspicuous consumption, or his wife’s disrespectful treatment of
her parents-in-law. These manners and values were in sharp contrast to the piety and knowledge represented by the old grandfather or the patriotism reflected in the uncle’s decision to stay in Pakistan and help build up the country. The OPSA playwrights used the opposition between values considered Danish, Western or modern and those considered Pakistani as a means to urge the audience to manage their lives and identities carefully.

However, the most important assertion of identity was the division between identity configurations based on zaat and those grounded in Islam. The zaat identity was represented and ridiculed by Charlie’s wife, who nourished aspirations for zaat mobility, or by the comical character of Amir’s stubborn father. The religious identity on the other hand was emphasised by the development of the two teenagers who, by listening to their grandfather’s narrative, became absorbed in the national history of Pakistan, and gained an understanding of their destinies as children of a great Muslim nation-state and as brothers and sisters within the global umma of Islam.

Zaat, as the patrilineal clan, has been a widespread principle of social organisation and stratification in rural Pakistan. Each zaat has a distinct historical and socio-economic status and, even though the migration process has in many instances turned old hierarchies upside-down, some of these connotations still persist in how members of these different groups view themselves and are viewed by others (Shaw 2000: 115). But due to the relatively small number of Pakistani migrants constituting the village-like community in Denmark, the situation seems different to that in the UK. Whereas networks of relatives, fellow-villagers or zaat members were significant agents in facilitating the process of chain migration in the early 1970s and the establishment of businesses in the 1980s (Hjarnø 2000; Quraishy 1999), Pakistani families also mixed with each other as neighbours, colleagues or friends, in spite of zaat differences. This changed as large groups of second-generation Pakistanis grew up and became ready for marriage in the 1990s. Zaat suddenly became a highly relevant feature of identity and a way to distinguish between families, as it was reintroduced by the parent’s generation as a prescriptive boundary in marriage arrangements. As Nadeem, a former chairman of OPSA explained: ‘It is not us (the second generation) who think of zaat. That is simply a domain of the parents. It is their privilege or destiny to think this way’.

In discussing the so-called ‘post-traditional society’, Giddens (1994) distinguishes between different knowledge regimes, i.e. ‘experts of knowledge’ and ‘guardians of truth’. Where the first is a non-local, decentred and contingent way of knowing that can be mastered by experts, the second obtains authority and legitimacy from formulaic notions of truth, which is solely the privilege of the guardians. The composition and significance of the zaat system have traditionally been a prerogative of the parental generation; they are the ones who know how to navigate it, understand why it should be considered important and will confide what will inevitably go wrong if youngsters decide to transgress the prescriptive boundary of the zaat in marriage.
The religious revivalism of the young generation can be seen as a counter-strategy to the formulaic truth-regime of the parents’ generation. In studying the Qur’an and the sunna, they see no justification for dividing Muslims into different zaat. Often a person who falls in love with someone and wants to marry will seek Islamic arguments to convince their parents that this kind of marriage is a religious right (Jacobson 1998; Rytter 2003b; Shaw 2000: 193). The second generation have increasingly become ‘experts of (Islamic) knowledge’, a resource which they use in intergenerational negotiations with their parents.

OPSA has always been a significant player in the ongoing process and in distancing the second generation from ideas and practices related to zaat identities. In this wider historical context, it is of no surprise that A Sunbeam of Hope ended by advocating community solidarity and commemorated encompassing identity configurations of being Pakistani and of being Muslim, which were shared by everyone in the audience.2

An Imagined Return

Finally, A Sunbeam of Hope can also be interpreted as an imaginary return. Absorbed in an atmosphere of cultural intimacy, the actors and the audience were offered an opportunity to imagine what it would be like to return to Pakistan and meet long-lost family members. The desire to return is widespread, particularly among the older generation (Mølgaard and Lindblad 1995). There has been a prevalent ‘myth of return’ (Anwar 1979): in the 1960s and early 1970s, the object of migration was to make money and then return, but plans changed and families settled in Denmark instead. However, the nostalgic longing for a life in Pakistan, with its extended family, warmer climate and life in the village as it was ‘in the good old days’, has always been marked among the parental generation.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many families sent their offspring to boarding schools in Pakistan, to prepare them for their parents’ imminent return. During the last three decades many families have tried to resettle in Pakistan, but the vast majority have moved back to Denmark again. In Pakistan, families were confronted with the harsh reality of bureaucracy and corruption, poor health and school systems, and a demanding family wanting a share of their savings. Sooner or later, many realised that the place they had been longing for no longer existed. Common memories, narratives and dreams had in many respects made Pakistan become a fiction or an ‘imaginary homeland’ (Rytter 2006).

Despite the shared experiences of disappointment and disillusion, and now that the second generation is working and getting married, the possibility of the family’s return has again become an option. The highly educated second-generation members of OPSA have the personal and professional resources to start a new life in one of Pakistan’s major cities. Their upward social mobility has made dreams
of return and resettlement as an affluent extended family more realistic than ever before. When one discusses the issues of return with Pakistanis, they often explain that it has become much more difficult to be a ‘foreigner’ or a Muslim in Denmark since 11 September 2001. Furthermore, the Liberal–Conservative government elected in Denmark in October 2001, after a campaign mainly focusing on problems related to immigration and immigrants, has from the start depended on the votes and goodwill of a right-wing nationalist party, the Danish People’s Party, to stay in office. The influence of the latter on political discourse and decision-making has altered the political climate and the way ‘the immigrant other’ is conceptualised in Danish politics and in society in general. The experience of being unwanted and harassed intensified during the so-called ‘cartoon affair’ in late 2005 and 2006 (Hedetoft 2006; Henkel 2006), and its temporary revival at the beginning of 2008. Some argue that this altered political climate has resulted in a certain ‘ethno-nationalism’ (Gullestad 2006: 302), where it becomes difficult for the children of immigrants—even those who have been born and raised in Denmark—to be accepted as law-abiding fellow-citizens who contribute to the welfare state though their educational achievements, work, taxes, political participation and so on. Instead they are met with suspicion. This recent socio-political development has made many Pakistani families seriously consider the possibility of leaving Denmark and instead moving to the UK, Canada, Sweden or Pakistan. Thus the idea of return has returned. In her study of Pakistanis in Bradford, Bolognani reached a similar conclusion: whereas the elder generation’s ‘myth of return’ was fed with a hope to improve material conditions in Pakistan, the young generation seems to be much more idealistic. For them Pakistan has become the place where they can escape European racism and Islamophobia (2007: 65–6).

One of the well-educated members of the younger generation who has reacted against the new political trends in Denmark is my interpreter, Hassan. In 2005 he moved his business, wife, two children and mother permanently to Lahore. He did this partly to oblige his homesick Pakistani wife and mother, and partly because he did not want his children to grow up in a Danish society in which they would always be second-class citizens. Knowing now that, three years after we sat together in the dark assembly hall enjoying the OPSA performance, Hassan would move his family to Pakistan makes it understandable that he should have ‘had goose bumps all over’. Maybe the idea of leaving Denmark and returning to Pakistan had already taken shape in the back of his mind.

In the context of a ‘homeland’ handed down from generation to generation and of the current socio-political environment in Denmark, A Sunbeam of Hope could be interpreted as an imagined return and possible reconciliation with the past. The play urges families to see Pakistan as a serious alternative to life in Denmark. No matter how distanced or alienated the old and young generations may feel towards people and places in Pakistan, it is still possible to re-create the strong ties of emotion and
solidarity. In this respect, the message of the play seems to be that, despite everything, there is hope for the future.

Concluding Remarks: The Family Revisited

Among migrants, notions of identity and belonging are highly political and contested topics. This is not only the case in national political discourses on immigration, but also in the micro-universe of the family. Young people especially may find it difficult to formulate a legitimate opposition to established values and ways of living within the family. This article shows how members of a Pakistani youth organisation were able to use artistic expression as a means to address some of the problems they share in relation to their parents’ generation. In so doing, they succeeded in turning delicate private matters into topics of public discussion.

*Sunbeam of Hope* illustrates how second-generation Pakistanis might have very different ideas of how to evaluate the range of identities that they share with their parents due to their common history as immigrants in Denmark. The case exemplifies the growing cleavage between the generations when it comes to definitions of who they are and where they belong. From an analytical perspective, these differences call for future research on the internal dynamics of migrant families. It is far from obvious how identity and belonging are negotiated within transnational families, or whether these negotiations will result in continuity or radical changes of intimate social relations.

Today, OPSA is no longer an active organisation after several years of declining membership. One reason for this is that many of the members finished their studies, started work and got married, leaving little spare time for voluntary work in a student organisation. Those who remained active in the organisation experienced severe disillusionment, not feeling that their efforts made any difference in either the Pakistani community or the wider Danish society. Finally OPSA has had a hard time competing with the numerous new youth organisations that have emerged in Denmark, recruiting young Muslims and offering them membership and the *communitas* of associations based on religious instead of national criteria. As a consequence, it was decided at the annual general meeting in 2007 to suspend the activities of the Pakistani student organisation.

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Notes

[1] The fieldwork among Pakistani migrants living in the area of Copenhagen, and on which this paper is based, began ten days before 9/11 and lasted for seven months.

[2] Interestingly, the second overall object of OPSA— ‘to integrate Pakistani youth into Danish society’—was totally absent on this day in August 2002. Following 9/11, many OPSA members were ambivalent in respect to the original ambition, as they did not feel accepted or recognised for their efforts by the wider Danish public or society. A crucial turning-point was when anonymous contributions celebrated the terror attack in New York on the OPSA website. Suddenly the homepage and the organisation were accused in national newspapers of being a site for discussing extremist viewpoints. Over the following year, committee members suspected that they were being monitored by various, though never identified, authorities. Retrospectively this incident changed the organisation and attitudes of the members. Thereafter the ideals of the OPSA founders were no longer salient; instead the value and importance of being Pakistani and Muslim were stressed.

References


