

## A FEMALE NEIGHBOUR IN WHOSE COUNTRY? THE UNTOLD STORY OF AFIA BEGUM AND THE SARI SQUAD

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This paper is one of the first attempts to reconstruct the story of Afia Begum, wife —and later widow— of Abdul Hamid (a Bangladeshi immigrant in Thatcherite London), whose entry was cleared by the British Home Office in 1982, months before her husband died tragically in a fire in East London. Upon her arrival in the United Kingdom, Afia was told that her grant to stay in the country was no longer valid owing to the death of her husband; that she was now an illegal immigrant in Britain. In the process of the reconstruction, I also revisit the untold story of the Sari Squad, a group of Asian women who fought valiantly, though peacefully, to stop Afia's deportation. Although Afia was deported on May 8, 1984, her case was heard in the European Court of Human Rights and debated in the European Parliament; in both forums, the highhandedness of the British Home Office was fiercely critiqued. By way of conclusion, I lay out a hermeneutic in which to read Afia's story, in a literary sense, offering a skeptical stance to reading it in binary terms of success-defeat/victimization-survival of a female foreigner battling a racist state. In doing so, I draw upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "connection between nationalism and reproductive heteronormativity", to argue that the case of Afia's deportation suggests that her nationality can only be —tragically— established by determining the citizenship of her husband; this ends up doubly othering and transcendentizing her nationality, reducing her to her sociobiological reproductive heteronormativity, impregnated with the cryptic trace of her husband's ghost which practically became the *summum bonum* of her deprived statehood.

KEY WORDS: Afia Begum, Sari Squad, Jeremy Corbyn, David Waddington, Harry Cohen, London, race relations.

### Una veïna al país de qui? La història inèdita d' Afia Begum i del Sari Squad

Aquest article constitueix un primer intent de reconstruir la història d' Afia Begum, esposa —i després vídua— d' Abdul Hamid (un immigrant de Bangladesh al Londres Thatcherià), l'entrada de la qual fou acceptada per la British Home Office el 1982, uns mesos abans de que el seu marit morís tràgicament en un incendi a East London. A la seva arribada al Regne Unit, a Afia se li va comunicar que, degut al decés del seu marit, el seu permís de residència ja no era vàlid; el que la convertia en una immigrant il·legal a Anglaterra. En el procés de reconstrucció d'aquests fets, revisitaré també la història inèdita del Sari Squad, un grup de dones asiàtiques que van lluitar feroçment, tot i que de forma pacífica, per impedir la deportació d' Afia. Malgrat que Afia va ser finalment deportada el 8 de maig de 1984, el seu cas va tenir ressò al Tribunal Europeu dels Drets Humans i es va debatre al Parlament Europeu. En ambdós casos, la prepotència de la

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British Home Office fou força criticada. Com a conclusió, exposo, en un sentit literari, una clau hermenèutica per analitzar la història d'Àfia a través d'un posicionament escèptic amb una lectura en termes binaris d'èxit-derrota/victimització-supervivència d'una dona estrangera que lluita contra un estat racista. Per fer-ho, empro la "connexió entre el nacionalisme i la heteronormativitat reproductiva" tal com la teoritza Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak amb la fi d'argumentar que el cas de la deportació d'Àfia suggereix que la seva nacionalitat sols pot ser determinada a través de la del seu marit; el que acaba alterant i transcendentalitzant doblement la seva nacionalitat, reduint-la a la seva heteronormativitat reproductiva sociobiològica, impregnada per la petjada críptica del fantasma del seu marit, que es va convertir en el *summum bonum* de la seva estatalitat desproveïda.

PARAULES CLAU: Àfia Begum, Sari Squad, Jeremy Corbyn, David Waddington, Harry Cohen, Londres, relacions racials.

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Fig. 1: Sari Squad members protesting the deportation of Afia Begum (circa 1984). Courtesy of Glasgow Women's Library (with thanks to Nicola Maksymuk and Lucy Brownson).

The role of women, through their placement in the reproductive heteronormativity that supports nationalisms, is of great significance in this narrative. When we are born, we are born into the possibility of timing, temporalization: we are in time. This possibility we can grasp only by temporizing, thinking and feeling a before, which through a now, will fall due in an after [...]. Another example of temporizing towards a future that will fall due is of women as holding the future of the nation in their wombs. It comes from the obvious narrative of marriage. Language, mother, daughter, nation, marriage [...]. The task of the literary imagination in the contemporary is the persistent de-transcendentalization of such figures.

—GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK, “Nationalism and the Imagination” (2009)

London, England—On May 5 [1984], a Bangladeshi woman, Afia Begum and her three-and-half year old daughter were forcibly deported from Britain after a massive police search that ended in a dawn raid on a council estate house in East London. She had been in hiding for over a year.

Afia Begum had been given an entry certificate to come to Britain and join her husband. Shortly before she came, her husband died in a fire that destroyed the slum tenement where he lived. According to the Home Office, Afia Begum had lost her right to stay. [...]

What is new in the case of Afia Begum is the movement against this racist state, the high stage of underground organization that gave the police the run-around for over a year and the new mass character of the campaign that spread throughout the country involving Black, women’s and anti-racist organizations.

—“Asian Deportation Fought” (1984)

The unfinished narrative of Afia Begum begins and ends against the admonitory note of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, without necessarily referring to the subject of our inquiry, and without necessarily even knowing her, had not overlooked the possibility of the female foreigner who needs to be de-transcendentalized by way of humanization and historicization.

Afia Begum lives in a timeless, de-temporalized world, in the sense that Spivak deploys the phrase “we are in time” —a woman without a nation, Afia is a persona without history. Her whereabouts were unknown when this article was written. I was yet to hear of her when I began dotting the final i’s and crossing the last t’s of *Indians in London* (2021) —my history of people of Indian origin living in London

since the age of Shakespeare, and even before, until the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nations, in 1947 (and then, into three, in 1971). For a while, I had even grown somewhat fond of narrating an anecdote from that saga of Indian migrations to London, that of Catherine Bengall —whom I jocularly referred to as Catherine of Bengall, mimicking the name of Catherine of Braganza, especially since our Bengali Catherine was no queen. She was trafficked to London from Bengal in the 1740s, at the age of ten, by one Suthern Davies who offered her to Ann Suthern, a Londoner. Catherine was baptized on November 26, 1745, at the St James Church in Westminster, before being unexpectedly set free by Ms Suthern. In the tale I had woven for Catherine, her life appeared to resemble Virginia Woolf's immortal creation, Judith Shakespeare, the fictional sister of William Shakespeare, from a *Room of One's Own*. Mirroring, as it were, the runaway Judith's miserable life, Catherine became the mistress of a man called William Lloyd. A son was born of the union in September 1746, at the parish workhouse of St Martin in the Fields, and was named William, after his father and also, incidentally, Judith's renowned brother. In the following years, the names of Catherine and young William disappeared from the records of the East India Company (Chatterjee, 2021: 99-100).

Each time I narrated this story, the image of Catherine that I had conjured in my mind seemed to grow more distant. I was aware that Catherine was just the symptom of a much wider culture of informal slave trade, gender- and race-based oppression and normalized epochs of inequality in the shared history of Britain and India. Yet, little I knew of Afia Begum, whose half-told life would come to haunt London two and half centuries after Catherine. Several people —well up in the history of race relations in postcolonial Britain— whom I asked about Afia Begum seemed to suggest they had never heard the name. This has brought me to make what is possibly one of the first attempts to reconstruct Afia's story, from newspapers, parliamentary speeches and stray records of the time.

Among other questions I would formulate along the way, as I weave the abject strands of Afia's life, is Rodrigo Andrés's misgiving on whether "the figure of the neighbor [...] expand[s] the circle of one's responsibility until it reach[es] the stranger —and even the foreigner— or [does] his/her alterity turn him/her into unassimilable, and intrinsically unlovable?" (2014: 12). In the context of the story I am to tell, Andrés's use of "neighbour" might seem inapposite given the apparent mildness of the term, except that I read it in the sense that Jacques Derrida broadens the connotations of neighbour to mean that "the other is my across-the-fence neighbor, a fellow citizen, or any other friend or person I don't know at the other end of the world" (2000: 51). Of course, the context really is one of hospitality to someone who we practically do not know, of an Afia who is literally "at the end of the world" of our cognition. But more than it being a question of

hospitality to an individual (a woman, at that), it is a question of hospitality to what gets born —a nativity, an idea, a community, a nation, a nationalism.

At the time of the writing of this article, I happened to discover the literary life of the nineteenth-century French authoress Flora Tristan. It has been argued (Reid, 2014) that Tristan was among those who conditioned themselves in the psychological identities of foreigners in their own countries —assuming, as it were, a prototype of the consciousness of “the foreigner in the self” that Jacques Derrida (2005: xxxi) and, more recently, Jodey Castricano (128-29) have explored. Tristan’s stance seems to have been inspired by the state of alien women and her creative zeal to be one with them. Afia’s life was devoid of Tristans as much as it remains devoid of a country —but whose country? That is the question.

### **The Tragedy of Afia Begum**

March 1982 was the harbinger of an exceptionally cold summer in London. The Brick Lane homestead that Afia Begum’s husband, Abdul Hamid, lived in had not been provided with a central heating system by the Tower Hamlets Council. By then, Hamid had lived in London for twelve years.

It was six years after the enactment of the United Kingdom’s Race Relations Act (1976), which prohibited discrimination on racial grounds in social, professional, educational, and administrative contexts besides in situations pertaining to law and order (“Race Relations Act 1976: 1976 Chapter 74”). In 1979, when the Conservative Party was elected, it seemed determined “to tighten immigration controls” and had “promised a fundamental reform of the citizenship and nationality laws” (Layton-Henry, 1986: 73). But the resistance to coercive police control put up by ethnic minority groups in London, in 1980 and 1981, impelled the second Thatcher administration —re-elected in May 1983— “to play down race relations and immigration and to avoid allowing them to remain a prominent area of decision-making and conflict” (Layton-Henry, 1986: 73). Meanwhile, “the failure of the police” to adequately protect ethnic minorities in London “against increasing racist violence” was well known (Burnham, 1988: 117). Black Londoners and members of the Asian community were frequently targeted “by supporters of the fascist National Front and similar groups” (117). Examples of these include the 1981 attack on a physically challenged Sikh woman who was “burned to death when a firebomb was thrown into her home, and, in a different case, an elderly Asian woman died after racists poured gas over her and set fire to her sari” (117). Two years later, eight Asians based in Newham were arrested and tried for antisocial activities following an incident when they tried to protect their children from racism at school.

In April 1981, London had witnessed the gruesome Brixton riots, where the police and residents of Brixton clashed, on April 11, as the city incurred hundreds

of public and police casualties. Later in April, Home Secretary William Whitelaw appointed Lord Leslie George Scarman to head a public inquiry into the riots. The Scarman report, published on 25 November, produced unimpeachable evidence that the Metropolitan Police had made disproportionate and indiscriminate use of their stop and search powers, targeted particularly towards the African-Caribbean community living in and around Brixton. By March, the following year, racial tensions had spread from the south to east of London.

On a bitterly cold mid-March afternoon, Hamid turned on the paraffin wax heater to warm up his Brick Lane home. It was his only respite given the absence of central heating in the homes of Bangladeshi and Asiatic immigrants in Margaret Thatcher's London. The curtain in the household caught a flying spark and went up in flames. Soon, the fire spread to the whole house. By the end of the day, Hamid was no more. The fire had engulfed his home along with him.

In the words of Harry Cohen, British Labour Party politician and Member of Parliament for Leyton from 1983 to 1997, “[i]n January 1982, Afia was granted an entry certificate to join her husband in Britain. On 15 March 1982 fire swept through the slum tenement in Brick Lane where he lived and he was tragically killed” (Cohen, 1984a: n.p.). Afia was still in Bangladesh with her eighteen-month-old daughter when she received news of her husband's death. Her father and other members of the family lived in England. Bereaving was bad enough for Afia. What was worse, however, was that she became a widow at a time when she had almost finished all formalities of immigrating to Britain, to stay with her husband. Before his death, she had applied to the Home Office under the normal procedure to join her husband. But now, she waited for the funeral rites of her husband, before leaving Bangladesh for London. Little did she know that now that her husband was no more, the permission secured from the Home Office was reduced to a reversible formality. Thus, “on arrival, [she] was effectively told, ‘Your circumstances have changed. Your entry permit is invalidated and you are no longer allowed to stay’” (Cohen, 1984a: n.p.). This incident occurred in June 1982, at Heathrow airport, when immigrations officials informed her that her immigration visa was no longer valid, and that the promises made to her by the Home Office or their representatives no longer held any legal ground in the United Kingdom. The logic used by the Home Office was that, apparently, if Afia Begum had landed in London even an hour before her husband's death, she could have been considered a legal British citizen. But under the current provisions, she was now an illegal person in the country, perhaps even a potential suspect for anti-state activities. Nineteen-year-old Afia and her infant daughter, Asma, were now scheduled to be deported back to Bangladesh. What exactly happened to Afia in the hours following her arrival in London is unknown except for the fact that she was allowed to stay in London temporarily to settle her husband's affairs. This is how she found her way

to Brick Lane. In January 1983, when her deportation seemed imminent, Afia Begum went into hiding with Asma.

## Enter the Sari Squad

The Sari Squad remains one of the principal reasons that make the case of Afia Begum much more than a fragment. Ironically, the Sari Squad itself is largely forgotten except by some antiracist and feminist groups in Europe. Recently, the Sari Squad was referred to by the Rastafarian poet Benjamin Zephaniah, while recounting his experiences in Thatcherite London. “The legendary Sari Squad”, remarked Zephaniah, “were women, mainly of south Asian origin, who were experts in various martial arts and ready and willing to take on any racists who would try to spoil our fun. They fought with style and would usually burst into song after seeing off any attackers” (Zephaniah, 2016). Comprised of five founding members, namely Putul, Pam, Nigel, Nazli and Ghazala, the Sari Squad turned Afia’s name into a widespread campaign by bringing to the fore what Cohen would go on to describe as the Home Office’s “callous and uncivilised treatment of [Afro-Asian] widows and their children” (Cohen, 1984b: n.p.). The Sari Squad’s campaign created a strong awareness in anti-racist and feminist circles about the miseries that Afia and Asma had to court.

## Fighting for Their Rights

*Asian women battle immigration laws*



Members of the Sari Squad

It all began with Afia Begum. One grey morning in June 1982, 20 year old Afia reached London’s Heathrow airport with her daughter Asma, unaware of the fate that awaited her. She had undertaken her long journey from Bangladesh to be with her father who has been in Britain since

railings outside home secretary Leon Brittan’s house and protested against the deportation of Afia. Thus the “Sari Squad” was born. Their effort, however was in vain.

After a long and bitter campaign led by the Sari and supported by the East London Workers against Racism (ELWAR), which involved various Labour MPs and an offer from Ken Livingstone (chief of the Greater London Council) to provide her with a council house and sanctuary in London’s Country Hill, Afia Begum was arrested and after two days in prison, deported with her daughter on 5 May this year. The Sari Squad, however is still fighting the Afia case which had become a rallying point for the struggle against racial inequality and the injustice of immigration laws. As Rhezia, one of the founding members of the Sari Squad said, “The Afia Begum case was started by the Workers against Racism but after all this we got a lot of publicity and support. It

Fig. 2: Facsimile of a report on Sari Squad members protesting the deportation of Afia Begum and her infant daughter from London to Bangladesh, May 1984. See Paul (1984).



Fig. 3: Sari Squad members protesting the deportation of Afia Begum (circa 1983). Courtesy of Glasgow Women's Library (with thanks to Nicola Maksymuk and Lucy Brownson).

According to the Squad members —whose views were circulated in several feminist magazines, including the popularly recognized and reputed *Big Mamma Rag*— the responsibility for Hamid's death lay with the Tower Hamlets Council that had refused to provide central heating to the residents, despite repeated requests. In November 1982, the Sari Squad instituted the Afia Begum Campaign, and began a new centre called the Afia Begum Campaign Centre at 114A Brick Lane, to fight against the unconstitutional deportations of hapless immigrants to Britain. They were aided by the East London Workers Against Racism. Representatives of the Squad and the Campaign —which went on to include Irish and Englishwomen, Asian women and men, and a large body of sympathizers drawn from the general public— made Afia the face of the large mass of vulnerable Black and Asian immigrants in London who were susceptible to institutional racism and being falsely targeted as de facto criminals. The Sari Squad members toured across Britain gathering support for Afia's campaign.

By August 1983, Afia Begum had been charged with her fifth deportation warrant by the Home Office. It was here that the Sari Squad really came to action. On August 15, members of the Sari Squad prepared for a march unto death on the principles of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. They tied themselves to the railings outside the house of Leon Brittan, the then Home Secretary, and sloganeered to protest against Afia's deportation. The Squad members knew that they would be arrested and were prepared for it. What they experienced was much worse. The members were arrested and taken to the Rochester Police Station. Here



they were forced by the police officers to strip. As Pam later narrated the hellish details of the strip-search:

Ghazala and another woman refused. They were taken to another room, their saris removed and dragged back in front of the male officers in just an underskirt and a very thin piece of material on top. I took off my own sari and then properly stripped. They felt us up. They used their hands. (qtd. in Phillips and Rakusen 173)

The five women were then forced to stand almost naked in front of police officers, wearing nothing but bras and slips. “They were charged with obstruction and put in cells overnight —cells which stank of urine” (Cohen, 1984a: n.p.). When the women called out the blatant unconstitutionality of the act, the police officials jeered and laughed at them, threatening greater torture. Before presenting the members for trial, the original charge of obstruction was changed to breach of peace, “as that was the only way they could justify keeping the women in cells overnight in the first place” (Cohen, 1984a: n.p.). Even those charges did not stand in court.

The women who appeared at Horseferry Road Court, were: Palavi Parekh, aged 21, of Victoria Road, Aston, Birmingham; Nita Datta, aged 20, unemployed, of Nicholson Road, Sheffield; Parajati Teare, aged 29, and Ghazala Faizi, aged 26, a community worker, from Alverstone House, Kennington Park Estate, Kennington, South London, the only four of who was prevented by the police from chaining herself up. (“Asian women bound over”, 1983: n.p.)

Among other adversaries of the Sari Squad was a Londoner who had complained to the police when the Squad members began sloganeering outside Brittan’s house. During the trial, the man yelled in court: “If you don’t like the laws of this land, why don’t you go back to your own country” (“Join the Sari Squad”, 1983: 11). The judge, compelled by the public display of racist rage, “bound [three Squad members] over in the sum of £1000 [...] to keep the peace for a year” (“Asian women bound over”, 1983: n.p.).

## The Road to Deportation

Over the course of the next nine months, “[t]he Home Office’s hard line forced Afia and her baby into hiding”, where they were protected by the Sari Squad. The members of the Squad helped organise “a meeting in the House [of Commons] which 200 people attended”. It was sponsored by Harry Cohen (Cohen, 1984a). David Waddington, the Minister of State at the Home Office, acknowledged that

Afia's case was rare and needed due consideration. However, at 6 a.m. on May 3, 1984, the police arrested Afia from the Brick Lane address where she was hiding, "without giving her a chance to wash or dress" (Healy, 1984: n.p.), "bundled her and the baby into a van and sent them off to Harmondsworth" (Cohen, 1984b: n.p.). Cohen and Corbyn visited the Home Office to plead her case. They informed Waddington that Afia's father had lived in the United Kingdom for twenty-six years, and that her mother and her young brothers had the right to eventually settle in the country. Despite Waddington's show of concern, he seemed to lack compassion for Afia's "personal circumstances or for the frail condition of her father" (Cohen, 1984b: n.p.). The only compassionate allowance he made was to allow her father to visit her in Harmondsworth. In the meantime, protests by the Sari Squad and Labour members had managed to take Afia's case to the European Commission of Human Rights and a debate was due at the European Parliament.

On Friday, 7 May, 1984, the Labour Party members were informed that the Home Office had decided to deport Afia the following day. Cohen speculated that the reason for the hurry was that the Government wanted to avoid any delay before Afia's matter could be discussed again in the House of Commons or be placed before the European Parliament. This was despite the fact that four Labour Party members had earlier pleaded with the Home Office, and Tara Singh, a city councillor from Amsterdam, had sent a telex to the Home Office informing that she was prepared to host Afia at her home, in Holland, until the hearing of the case at the European Court of Human Rights. Madam Van Den Henyel—a Dutch Member of the European Parliament and the leader of the Socialist group in the Dutch Parliament—also sent a telex to the UK Home Office, informing that she was keen to represent before the Dutch Government the matter of Afia's stay in Holland. Since it was the last working day of the week, both solicited the Home Office to delay the deportation process before formal representations could be presented in Afia's favour. When Cohen tried reaching out to Waddington, in the middle of the day, the latter was reported unavailable. The following day, Saturday, May 8, Jeremy Corbyn staged a protest in the House of Commons, fervently seeking to move the Adjournment of the House, under Standing Order No. 10, for the British Parliament's urgent reconsideration of the deportation of Afia Begum. He argued that since her arrival in Britain, she had been subjected to "an unremitting war waged by the Home Office to try to ensure that she [was] deported" back to Bangladesh (Corbyn, 1984: n.p.). In spite of Corbyn and Cohen, "Afia and Asma were bundled on to a plane to Bangladesh at 10 o'clock [...] and when the plane reached Holland, Afia and her baby were not allowed to leave it" (Cohen, 1984b: n.p.) to prevent them from finding safe haven in that country. Corbyn, who followed them to the airport, made a last-ditch attempt at persuading

the immigrations officials at the airport, but, yet again, his remonstrations fell on deaf ears.

### Negotiating an Aftermath

Two hundred people staged a protest outside Heathrow airport after Afia's deportation. Twenty-one demonstrators were arrested by the police and held for over five hours in custody (Bhabha, Klug and Sutter, 1985: 97). Afia's family members were harassed by the police and their London homes were put under surveillance. Following the deportation, thirty Sari Squad members and affiliates hired a bus and took the case to the European Court of Human Rights in Netherlands. The European Parliament heard the case on May 24, 1984, carrying a resolution of 71 votes to 58 in favour of the position that the British government's deportation of Afia Begum was unconstitutional, even though she was a citizen of Bangladesh who was living in the United Kingdom. The resolution recognized that if Afia's husband was still alive, her deportation could not even have been imagined. It also took cognizance of the fact that Afia's father (who was old and unwell) and several close relatives of hers were living in Britain at the time and that she had no means to support herself and her infant daughter in Bangladesh. In a second motion heard by the Parliament, the result was 70 votes to 67, in favour of recognizing the British government's act as exemplary of the racist and misogynist nature of the United Kingdom's immigration policy. Ironically —as Cohen later noted in the House of Commons— the European Parliament was a Tory-biased space and for it to come up with such a verdict in favour of Afia, who had been wronged by the Tories in Britain, suggested a racialist malaise in British institutions.

The Labour Party and the Sari Squad were united in the conviction Afia was a victim of the elusive and changing definitions of illegal immigrants in Britain. Anne Owers of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants wrote a letter to *The Guardian* in which she reported Waddington saying that he was not “swayed simply because a campaign has built up. How could it be fair for me to allow someone to stay just because there is a massive publicity bandwagon?” (qtd. in Cohen, 1984b: n.p.). On May 9, *The Guardian*, in a leading article on the deportation of Afia Begum, reported that “the Home Office has tightened up its application of the rules as the price to the Tory right for their silence over further changes to the immigration law”, thus highlighting the deeply politicized nature of illegality when it came to citizenship, especially of people of Asiatic origins (qtd. in Couper and Santamaria, 1984: 451). *The Asian Times*, in a pivotal report published on May 11, titled “Zola in, Afia out”, contrasted the facts of Afia Begum's claims to live in the UK with those of Zola Budd, the 17-year-old South African runner who was granted British nationality by descent at the discretion of the

Home Secretary to enable her to compete in the Olympic Games as a member of the British team, shortly before Afia Begum was arrested and deported for overstaying. Labour and the Sari Squad were far from convinced by the argument that Britain was so densely populated that there was no room for Afia whereas there was enough for Zola. *The Guardian* went so far as to suggest that the Home Office's "ferocious" pursuit of illegality clauses may have proved that it was "marching out of step with the country" (Couper and Santamaria, 1984: 452).

Fueled by rhetoric from the Sari Squad, and supported by the East London Workers Against Racism, the Labour Party also argued that in the case of the "nine-day wonder case of Zola Budd", the Home Office made a prompt decision to rehabilitate Budd in Britain within nine days. The Minister of State had claimed on the BBC that Zola Budd was permitted legal entry into Britain because her father was able to register as a British citizen — a right that even Afia's father had been granted. Upon being asked when Zola Budd's father had applied for British citizenship, the Minister reported by saying that the person in question was a *de facto* British citizen (implying that his white South African status was tantamount to British citizenship) and that he need not have applied for it in the first place, in the otherwise official way that Afia Begum had to contest for her citizenship in a deeply racial setting. In July 1984, the *Searchlight* published a scathing report questioning Britain's deeply asymmetrical immigration policy which "evoke[d] memories of the support it once gave [Oswald] Mosley's blackshirts has been made possible by the fact that" some families possessed "the 'right' culture and class credentials: they have the 'right' dress, attitudes and religion," while others did not ("Immigration", 1984: 17-18). The article lambasted the *Daily Mail* for its selective compassion shown to families that it deemed suitable for immigration to Britain, without according similar treatment to:

Afia Begum and her small daughter, both of whom were ambushed and then deported from Britain [...] Afia had no English village behind her. In her sari, she remained the symbol of the alien "other" who had made no real attempt to "assimilate". She was, it seems, not enough of an Anglophile to be worthy of Home Office compassion. ("Immigration", 1984: 18)

Others like Afia from Asian countries had to wait two years or more to join their families in the UK. In the interim, the Home Office and immigration officers would search the facts of their applications cases "with a fine-tooth comb to find discrepancies" or "incite discrepancies by asking leading questions" (Cohen, 1984b: n.p.).

The story of Afia, Asma and the Sari Squad practically ended in 1984, but more so because the records of the case were so effectively wiped out by the Home Office

and the police. However, on 24 February, 1985, when Central Television broadcast its show *Here and Now*, it brought Afia Begum back to the limelight for a brief while, reflecting on the Sari Squad posters from the previous year which said “Afia will stay”. In one manner of speaking, Afia Begum did stay back, that is to say, she stayed very much alive in the consciousness of the British public. And so did the Sari Squad, because it was, after all, owing to their efforts that, beginning with *Here and Now*, the depiction of Asian sari-clad women underwent a sea-change in British media. Despite the Race Relations Act of 1976, intermittent racist outbursts and sexist slurs cast at Asian women were still the norm in London until the emergence of the Sari Squad. After 1984, however, the positive depiction of the squad’s members, in particular, and Asian women in general, was indeed owing to the battle that Afia and her valiant supporters had fought. If the disappearance of their records is taken as an index, they will be thought of as a defeated group of people. However, if their impact on the public psyche and the sustained effects of that struggle on Britain’s declining racial and sexist biases could be actually determined, the memory of the twenty-one-year-old (British-) Bangladeshi widow and the crusaders of 114A Brick Lane were the uncrowned heroes of this repressed saga.

This logic, nevertheless, can mislead us into a premature utopic notion, viewing Afia’s story as a feminist triumph rather than a negotiation in continuum. What follows is a cautionary note, by way of a conclusion, on how *not* to interpret the legacy of —the paradoxically titled— “Afia will stay” campaign, when seen in the light of Spivak’s theory of de-transcendentalizing nationalism.

### **De-Transcendentalizing the Neighbour**

In responding to *The Guardian*, on May 14, 1984, Waddington remarked that state and police control were not only consistent with the formation of a responsible British community but that they were “essential”. He argued that Britain was a “densely populated nation” which could not afford to maintain its standards of housing, jobs and society if “more than a certain amount of newcomers be absorbed all at once [...] without the risk of friction” (qtd. in Couper and Santamaria, 1984: 451). Waddington had certainly worded his riposte in much more sufferable language than the infamous 1968 speech better known as the “Rivers of Blood”, delivered by Enoch Powell, Conservative Member of Parliament, at a meeting of the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham. Presenting examples in the style of Thomas Babington Macaulay offering anecdotal evidence in favour of the 1835 Indian Education Act, Powell referred to a conversation with a middle-aged constituent who, apparently, told him that, in Britain, “in fifteen- or twenty-years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man”. Powell’s own assessment was that:

As time goes on, the proportion of this total who are immigrant descendants, those born in England [...] will rapidly increase. Already by 1985 those born here would constitute the majority [...]. The significance and consequences of an alien element introduced into a country or population are profoundly different according to whether that element is one per cent or 10 per cent. The answers to the simple and rational question are equally simple and rational: by stopping, or virtually stopping, further inflow, and by promoting the maximum outflow. Both answers are part of the official policy of the Conservative Party [...] at this moment 20 or 30 additional immigrant children are arriving from overseas in Wolverhampton alone every week —and that means 15 or 20 additional families a decade or two hence. Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependents, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre. So insane are we that we actually permit unmarried persons to immigrate for the purpose of founding a family *with spouses and fiancées whom they have never seen*. (Powell, 1968: n.p.; emphasis added)

Powell's speech is the cue that takes us back to the question I asked at the beginning —whose country is Afia's life devoid of? This is not to sentimentalize the deportation or the absence of our knowledge about the whereabouts of Afia Begum; nor is this to ask what may seem here a trite question: did Britain deserve Afia? I do not intend to either literalize or rhetorize my question. Rather, I wish to suggest that one way of defining Britain as a country, or a nation, in Afia's time, is the way Powell implicitly defined it, sixteen years before her deportation. Call it his "mad, literally mad" creative genius or an institutionalized racist will, Powell recognized —in a paranoid recognition— the threatening phantasmagoria of white British sterility faced against a radical fertility of the Afro-Caribbean or Asian other. In another anecdote, he alluded to an old white female constituent from Northumberland, a widow, who was afraid to go out of her home or let it out on rent, as her neighbourhood was populated by "ne...oes" who, allegedly, often broke her windows, pushed excreta into her letterbox and offered to butt her out of her home for a price worth a few weeks of rent. Having arrived at the crossroad of a nationalist epoch —three years since the passing away of an uber-nationalist Winston Churchill, while the Race Relations Act was being hotly discussed in Britain— Powell chose to transcendentalize xenophobia. That, too, transcendentalized nationalism, albeit by negation. Spivak's annotation is most pertinent here: "We lack the cognitive faculty to know nationalism", she argues, "because we allow it to play only

with our imagination, as if it is knowledge” (Spivak 87). What Powell did was fuel a nationalist imagination to create the semblance of a *knowledge* of native white disenfranchisement. By implication, Afia and her infant daughter—radically othered by virtue of being feared as doubly fertile—were turned into symbols to exact retribution in response to that historic disenfranchisement that Powell had imagined.

It is against this counterintuitive hypothesis that I intend to read Afia’s story or, at least, offer a skeptical stance to reading it in binary terms of success-defeat/victimization-survival of a female foreigner battling a racist state. The latter reading is by no means politically and historically inaccurate; on the contrary, most observers would probably remember Afia as an archetype of feminist valor. But I sense that this interpretation lacks the communicative rationality that Spivak provides in tracing the “connection between nationalism and reproductive heteronormativity” (Spivak, 2009: 76). For Spivak, nationalism is never far from “the circumstances of one’s birth, its recoding in terms of migration, marriage and history disappearing into claims to ancient birth. Its ingredients are to be found in [...] reproductive heteronormativity [...]. Are you natural or naturalized? George Bush or Madeline Albright? Bulgarian or Turk?” (78). In the case of Afia Begum’s deportation, the answer to these can only come by determining how naturalized her husband, Hamid, was as a Bangladeshi or Briton. The irony of de-transcendentalizing Afia lies in the fact that her gender and her socio-biological position as a mother need to be marginalized while foregrounding her identity as a citizen, which none of her defendants could clearly articulate. On the other hand, the tragedy of *not* de-transcendentalizing her—a woman of colour in a racialized white society, a single mother and a helpless widow in a foreign country—is that she would continue to be socially and administratively judged by the absent ghost of her dead husband, whose voice does not speak from the crypt to gainsay Powell’s cryptic allegation that Afia was a spouse whom Hamid had *never seen*; as though Afia is not only the “second sex” but literally without a territorial/social identity except for her perversely oversexualized nationalistic otherness.

Finally, I return to Andrés’s question on whether Afia, the figure of the (denationalized) neighbour expands the circle of one’s responsibility until it reaches the stranger—and even the foreigner—or does her alterity turn her into unassimilable, and intrinsically unlovable? The very fact that I have chosen to answer this question implies how I recommend we see Afia: not as a woman, not a mother, not a widow, not the genesis of another transcendental nationalism, but as a neighbour. It is not the alterity of the neighbour that renders her unassimilable or unlovable but the fact that she is born, or given birth to, to enact the reproduction of the structures of transcendental nationalism, before being turned into a revered or feared symbol of that reproduction. This transcendentalizing ultimately reduced Afia to her sociobiological reproductive heteronormativity,

impregnated with the cryptic trace of her husband's ghost which practically became the *summum bonum* of her statehood.

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