

Mahtab Hussain

Did We Make a Mistake Coming Here?

Sat 16 July to Sun 11 September

11am - 5pm, Tue - Sun & Bank Holidays

FREE ENTRTY

Knowing the Path and Walking the Path

The British artist Mahtab Hussain (b. 1981) considers the interstices between identity, heritage, and displacement through his interdisciplinary practice, spanning photography, installation, film, and spoken word. His previous work offers a critical commentary as well as an examination of multiculturalism through the lens of the south Asian diaspora. In the largely portraiture series, *You Get Me?* (2008 – 2017), Hussain explored the multiplicities within cultural identity; in particular, how black culture—and specifically American—has inflected Asian youth culture in Britain. *Did We Make a Mistake Coming Here?* (2022) is his first sculptural work that is explicitly centred on the intertwining histories of the black and Asian diasporas and expands upon his analysis of identity formation and notions of ‘belonging’.

Hussain presents us with a cobbled path encased in a metal frame, with thirty-seven steel bars set into the cobblestones. The bars are inscribed with key historical moments, forming a timeline about the arrival and treatment of Afro-Caribbeans and south Asians after the Second World War. The timeline begins with the British Empire in the 16th century and takes us up to the Nationality and Borders Bill debated this year (2022). The inscriptions in the work embed our histories between the stones, and yet they also serve as interjections into what would otherwise be an ordinary cobbled pathway. And with this, the artist intimates that our history as the descendants of post-war immigrants is inseparable from the history of Britain and Empire. Yet at the same time, we are made to feel as if we are not a part of mainstream Britain. As we walk down the cobblestones, the gold fades and dissipates as we approach present day. Does this suggest that the promise of entering the motherland for a ‘better life’ is at best precarious,

or at worst a fiction? Or that the wealth exploited from our colonised homelands was never intended to be redistributed to us? These questions lead us to interrogate the term commonwealth itself: wealth that is common to whom? Hussain provides the opportunity to reflect on how we as British citizens locate ourselves within this trajectory of events that increasingly target black and Asian communities, and profoundly impact our sense of safety, security, and belonging.

Black Africans and south Asians have lived in the UK for hundreds of years, with the earliest record of African settlers dating around the 3rd century. From the 17th century onwards, descendants from both ethnicities lived in pockets all over the country, mostly as a result of the brutality of the British Empire. By the 19th century people of African and Asian descent had dispersed throughout a number of areas of Britain, many of whom which have made an impact in the fields of culture, politics, health, and science.

After the fall of the British Empire and the Second World War, a substantial influx of Caribbeans and Asians migrated to Britain as ‘subjects of the Empire’ to rebuild the country. Both communities faced racism and hostility at every level of society: the ‘colour bar’ excluded them from housing, pubs, and restaurants, and exploitation and racism was ingrained in the workplace. In defiance, many black and Asian organisations formed such as the Indian Workers Association (1950-1990). These offered provisions—and importantly—mobilised industrial action to campaign against racism for all communities. This heralded the beginning of the Afro-Caribbean and south Asian diasporas working in coalition or under the banner of ‘political blackness’, which was instrumental in pushing

through the Race Relations Acts in 1965 and 1968. These acts made racism in public illegal and made it an offense to refuse housing or exploit workers on the grounds of race. The Race Relations Acts were the first legislation in the very long and continuous road to challenge institutional racism.

While legislation was important, grassroots action remained imperative. In 1968, the British Black Panthers founded—comprised with Caribbean and Asian members—and fought for the rights of each community. The Panthers were part of a network of politically black organisations that mobilised grassroots action and community care. Their largely under-acknowledged legacy has had a long-lasting impact on black (British) culture and local government policy. Significantly, two of the most prominent members of the black power movement, Darcus Howe and Altheia Jones-Lecointe, went on to make history in their victorious battle against the corrupt and racist police in the trial of the Mangrove Nine in 1970.

Hussain's entry point into the timeline is as a child of the 1980s, and thus as a beneficiary of the actions of the politically black organisations that had come before. However, even though political blackness was a powerful organisational strategy, it is no longer commonly used by blacks and Asians collectively, arguably in part due to divisive tactics stoked by the government and the police. Appropriately, we have evolved through this label to further acknowledge the specificities in our histories and experiences under the continuing legacy of colonisation. It is also important to acknowledge and be accountable for prejudices between diaspora communities, especially anti-blackness. Indeed, the timeline recognises tensions between black and Asian communities in Birmingham, specifically in 2005. This is compounded by the articulation of the new 'enemy within'—the 'terrorist Muslim' stereotype—either as actor or sympathiser. Since 9/11, the construct of the terrorist Muslim as a narrative has superseded any critique of the neo-colonial pursuits of the so-called 'War on Terror'. Divisions have been further stoked by the horror of domestic terrorist events. These tensions, cultivated by poverty, deprivation, and alienation, are held up by the establishment to announce the 'failure' of 'multiculturalism'.

We must consider the extent to which the government have intentionally stoked tensions between black and Asian communities, as they have monitored and feared our unity since the 1950s. These tensions are further exploited by the tabloids who tell us that our unity has never existed and is impossible. It is imperative that we refuse these ahistorical proclamations that deny the history of the hard-fought battles that have made it safer for people of colour to walk the streets. The Black Lives Matter movement has reopened the conversation about social and structural racism in the British mainstream. Like the politically black organisations that came before them, they also offer some solidarity and support to other organisations, which focus on different forms of structural oppression.

Many of us from Hussain's generation speak in hushed tones about how we used to feel that we belonged in Britain, and that we don't anymore. This feeling of once belonging and now not belonging can be mapped out in the timeline through domestic as well as international events. From the drip feed of negative media representation post 9/11; continual police violence; further vilification of Muslims through the Prevent scheme; disproportionate sentencing for participation in the 2011 London riots; Brexit, which lowered the bar for 'acceptable' racism and accelerated the sharp rise in hate crime; the ongoing Windrush scandal which continues to destroy the lives of hundreds of British Caribbeans; and now the Nationality and Borders Bill, which enables the state to make someone stateless with no warning. It is no surprise then that people of the black and Asian diasporas suffer an increased sense of alienation from the narrative of 'inclusive multicultural Britain'. Our presence here feels more precarious than ever. Hussain poses the question—were we right to come here? The timeline creates a sobering opportunity to reflect on our trajectory as children of immigrants in the UK, and suggests that our future depends on remembering and reclaiming the narrative of our diasporic tradition of coalition building. How will we remember our solidarity post-political blackness, and activate the lessons learned to resist the acceleration of right-wing forces and the degradation of our rights—before it's too late?

Dr Ayesha Ghanchi-Goemans

MAHTAB HUSSAIN - 'DID WE MAKE A MISTAKE COMING HERE' 2022

37 KEY HISTORICAL MOMENTS

FROM THE 16TH CENTURY ONWARDS, THE BRITISH EMPIRE DOMINATES LARGE SWATHES OF THE GLOBE, THE LARGEST EMPIRE EVER TO BE KNOWN

15 AUGUST 1947 – THE PARTITION OF INDIA AND THE BIRTH OF PAKISTAN; OVER 15 MILLION DISPLACED

1947 – 'CITIZENS OF EMPIRE', INVITED TO THE UK, START TO MAKE THEIR WAY TO BRITAIN AFTER WORLD WAR II

1948 – THE BRITISH NATIONALITY ACT CREATES THE STATUS OF 'CITIZEN OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND COLONIES' AS THE SOLE NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP OF THE UK

1948 – HMT EMPIRE WINDRUSH DOCKS IN TILBURY, ESSEX, BRINGING WORKERS FROM THE CARIBBEAN TO ASSIST WITH WORK FORCE SHORTAGES AFTER WORLD WAR II

1950 – THE COLOUR BAR PREVENTS BLACK AND ASIAN PEOPLE FROM OBTAINING EMPLOYMENT, ENTERING PUBS, BARS AND RESTAURANTS, ENABLING LANDLORDS TO REFUSE HOUSING

1950-1990 – THE 'NEW' INDIA WORKERS ASSOCIATION EXPANDS ACROSS THE UK TO SUPPORT ANTI-DEPORTATION CAMPAIGNS AND ANTI-RACIST MOVEMENTS IN BRITAIN

29 AUGUST - 5 SEPTEMBER 1958 – NOTTING HILL RACE RIOTS: OVER 300 WHITE PEOPLE ATTACK THE HOMES OF WEST INDIAN RESIDENTS

1962 – THE COMMONWEALTH IMMIGRANTS ACT RESTRICTS THE FREE MOVEMENT OF WORKERS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH

1965 – THE RACE RELATIONS ACT BANS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN PUBLIC PLACES AND MAKES THE PROMOTION OF HATE, BASED ON RACE AND COLOUR, AN OFFENCE

1967 – THE NATIONAL FRONT, A FAR-RIGHT FASCIST POLITICAL PARTY, IS FOUNDED BY A.K. CHESTERTON, A STAUNCH IMPERIALIST

20 APRIL 1968 – ENOCH POWELL GIVES HIS 'RIVERS OF BLOOD' SPEECH BLAMING MASS IMMIGRATION THAT WOULD GIVE RISE TO A RACE WAR

1968 – THE BRITISH BLACK PANTHERS FORM A BLACK POWER ORGANISATION THAT FIGHTS FOR THE RIGHTS OF BLACK AND SOUTH ASIAN PEOPLE

1968 – THE RACE RELATIONS ACT MAKES IT ILLEGAL TO REFUSE HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT OR PUBLIC SERVICES TO A PERSON ON THE GROUNDS OF COLOUR OR RACE

9 AUGUST 1970 – THE MANGROVE NINE, A GROUP OF BLACK POWER ACTIVISTS, LEAD 150 PEOPLE ON A MARCH AGAINST POLICE HARASSMENT IN NOTTING HILL, LONDON

1976 – THE SOUTHALL YOUTH MOVEMENT (SYM), AN ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-FASCIST GROUP, IS ESTABLISHED AFTER GURDIP SINGH CHAGGAR IS MURDERED BY NEO-NAZI SKINHEADS

10 - 12 JULY 1981 – THE BRIXTON RIOTS: THE BLACK COMMUNITY CLASH WITH POLICE; RIOTING SPREADS TO BIRMINGHAM, LIVERPOOL, AND MANCHESTER

1982 – THE BRITISH NATIONAL PARTY, A FAR-RIGHT FASCIST POLITICAL PARTY, IS FOUNDED BY JOHN TYNDALL

1988 - 1989 – THE SALMAN RUSHDIE AFFAIR MOVES THE DEBATE FROM RACE TO RELIGION, AND ULTIMATELY LEADS TO THE UNITY OF ISLAM

1991 – THE ANTI-FEDERALIST LEAGUE, LATER TO BECOME UKIP, IS ESTABLISHED BY ALAN SKED; ITS SINGLE ISSUE, EUROSCEPTICISM, WOULD DEFINE THE MOVEMENT

22 APRIL 1993 – WHILE WAITING FOR A BUS, 18-YEAR-OLD STEPHEN LAWRENCE IS MURDERED IN AN UNPROVOKED RACIST KNIFE ATTACK IN LONDON

1999 – ANJEM CHOUDARY, A SOCIAL POLITICAL ACTIVIST, COMES TO PUBLIC ATTENTION AS 'THE FACE' OF ISLAMIC MILITANT EXTREMISM

2000 – THE TERRORISM ACT: ALLOWS THE POLICE TO EXERCISE 'STOP AND SEARCH' WHEN THERE IS REASONABLE SUSPICION THAT AN ACT OF TERRORISM WILL TAKE PLACE

7 JULY 2001 – THE BRADFORD RIOTS: HEIGHTENED TENSION BETWEEN THE BRITISH ASIAN COMMUNITY AND THE CITY'S WHITE MAJORITY ERUPTS

2001 – FOLLOWING THE ATTACKS OF 9/11, UK TROOPS ARE COMMITTED TO WAR IN AFGHANISTAN; THE WAR ON TERROR BEGINS

2003 – THE PREVENT STRATEGY, INTRODUCED BY TONY BLAIR'S NEW LABOUR GOVERNMENT, AIMS TO PREVENT RADICALISATION

7 JULY 2005 – 7/7 LONDON BOMBINGS: A SERIES OF FOUR COORDINATED SUICIDE ATTACKS ARE CARRIED OUT BY ISLAMIST TERRORISTS IN LONDON

22 - 23 OCTOBER 2005 - BIRMINGHAM RIOTS: TENSION MOUNTS BETWEEN CARIBBEAN AND BRITISH ASIAN COMMUNITIES FOLLOWING AN ALLEGED BUT UNSUBSTANTIATED GANG RAPE

12 SEPTEMBER 2006 – NIGEL FARAGE IS ELECTED LEADER OF UKIP UNTIL 2009, AND AGAIN IN 2010 - 2016; LATER, FARAGE WOULD BECOME LEADER OF THE BREXIT PARTY

2009 – FORMATION OF THE ENGLISH DEFENCE LEAGUE, AN EXTREME FAR-RIGHT ISLAMOPHOBIC ORGANISATION; TOMMY ROBINSON BECOMES DE FACTO LEADER

6 - 11 AUGUST 2011 – ENGLAND RIOTS: MARK DUGGAN IS SHOT DEAD BY POLICE, SPARKING RIOTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

MARCH 2014 – THE 'TROJAN HORSE AFFAIR' ALLEGES A CONSPIRACY TO INTRODUCE "ISLAMIST" OR "SALAFIST" ETHOS IN SCHOOLS IN BIRMINGHAM

16 JUNE 2016 – NIGEL FARAGE STANDS NEXT TO ANTI-MIGRANT 'BREAKING POINT' POSTER READING, "WE MUST BREAK FREE OF THE EU AND TAKE BACK CONTROL OF OUR BORDERS"

23 JUNE 2016 – THE UK VOTES TO LEAVE THE EUROPEAN UNION BY 52% TO 48% AND PRIME MINISTER DAVID CAMERON RESIGNS; NATIONALISM AND RACISM RISES SHARPLY IN THE UK

2018 – THE WINDRUSH SCANDAL: 83 PEOPLE ARE WRONGLY DEPORTED FROM THE UK BY THE HOME OFFICE; OTHERS ARE DETAINED AND THREATENED WITH DEPORTATION

28 MAY 2020 – BLACK LIVES MATTER: THE FIRST SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT IN THE UK AGAINST POLICE BRUTALITY AND RACIALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACK PEOPLE

APRIL 2022 – THE NATIONALITY AND BORDERS BILL IS DEBATED, ALLOWING THE UK GOVERNMENT TO DEPRIVE SOMEONE OF THEIR CITIZENSHIP