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## Un-(W)Rapping Trauma: Analyzing struggles of British-Asian Muslim Diaspora in Riz Ahmed's Rap Album *The Long Goodbye* (2020)

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### Abstract

Riz Ahmed's album titled "The Long Goodbye" is a commentary on the present day racial and religious dynamics in the British society at grass-root level. The album looks at the British-Asian struggles of co-existence, made worse due to the growing islamophobia in the west. Riz Ahmed's pens down this rampant racism, xenophobia and islamophobia, and gives voice to it through the popular mode of Rap Music due to its wider appeal to the teens and adolescents. The narrator is a British Muslim person going through breakup with a girl named Brittany (pointing at Britain). The narrative parallels the historical relation of Britain and South Asia, from colonization, two world wars, and India-Pakistan partition to current day events.

In the first song, titled "The Breakup (Shikwa)", the narrator/rapper is hurt as the Brittany has left him, and taken with her his money, which according to him was 'a quarter of the cash in the word', despite narrator's constant sacrifices and labor. Brittany even refuses to acknowledge their kids, referring British-Asian Muslim diaspora. The parallels drawn works effectively to invoke the historical imageries of the equally abusive conduct by the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent and the contemporary treatment of the immigrants. Other parallels drawn are 'Cashmere jumper's still stained red' to the Kashmir Violence, 'Scar down the middle' to the Partition, 'Beef with some German next man' to World Wars and many more. Other songs are laden with similar parallel imageries as well.

I will be studying the metaphors present in the lyrics and analyzing the latent messages of racism, xenophobia and islamophobia and how they aid the narrative. I aim to map the collective tropes of trauma, violence, memory and intersectional concerns in the lyrics. I

expect to find instances of struggles of the belonging faced by British Asian Muslim diaspora in the lyrics.

**Keywords:** Trauma; British-Asian Muslim Diaspora; Racism; Islamophobia; Rap Lyrics

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## Introduction

The Western nations are currently witnessing a troubling surge in racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic incidents. This rise in intolerance and discrimination is a matter of great concern for societies that strive to be inclusive and diverse. Addressing these issues through education, awareness, and proactive measures is crucial to foster a more tolerant and harmonious coexistence in these regions. According to the latest statistics provided by the BBC Home Office, the number of hate crimes which are recorded by police in England and Wales have risen by 26%, increasing to 155,841 in the year to March 2022 (Ashitha). More than two-thirds of the crimes committed were racist in nature and as such present a brutal picture of the current western society. At such a juncture, it thus becomes crucial to raise the voices of the marginalized people, no matter the medium so that the concerns can be addressed in a systematic fashion that is akin to the foundational legacy of any civilization. Mackintosh and Dempsey analysis the relation between the British-Asian Muslim youth's sports participation and their identity, which according to the authors is 'constantly in flux' and should not be a determiner in any case. They conclude that "given levels of cultural racism, perceptions of Islamophobia[sic] and the current wider political climate around immigration as a monolithic 'issue' this is a fertile ground for closer rich policy-related research" (Mackintosh and Dempsey).

Rap music, a potent instrument of resistance and counterculture rebellion, is then expertly used by Riz Ahmed in his album *The Long Goodbye* (2020) to eloquently capture the everyday life of the British-Asian Muslim diaspora. Riz Ahmed explores the diverse perspectives, difficulties, and goals of this people via his lyrical prowess, shining attention on topics frequently ignored by mainstream media. By utilizing the rap's expressive power, he highlights the challenges of British-Asian Muslims, giving them a voice and promoting a better understanding of their distinct cultural identity and lived experiences.

In his album *The Long Goodbye*, Riz Ahmed delves into the irrational and angry words of a heartbroken ex-partner, offering a fascinating exploration of the complexities of human relationships and the unfiltered emotions that go along with it. In addition, he deftly contrasts

this personal story with the current problems experienced by the British-Asian Muslim diaspora, making comparisons between the private and the public in order to produce a moving and provocative artistic message. This contrast provides listeners with a distinctive viewpoint and invites them to consider both personal heartache and the larger difficulties faced by the community, encouraging empathy and understanding.

In my analysis, I'll concentrate on locating and examining the metaphors that are woven into the lyrics with the goal of illuminating the implicit undertones of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia that permeate the story. I hope to do this in order to illuminate how these metaphors influence the musical themes of trauma, violence, memory, and intersectional struggles. This analysis will not only increase our knowledge of the artistic expression found in the album but will also shed light on more general social and cultural problems of the aforementioned community. The extracted revelations will offer insightful viewpoints on the challenges of cultural and racial integration, enhancing our comprehension of the complexity of the album's themes.

To introduce Riz Ahmed in a few words would be inconsequential to his grand and ongoing mission towards uplifting and voicing the concerns of the community. Talented British actor and rapper Rizwan (Riz) Ahmed has won numerous accolades throughout his career and even received an Emmy Award for his outstanding acting abilities. By making appearances on the coveted Billboard 200 charts, winning awards like the MTV VMA, and being named one of Time's 100 most important people in 2017, he has made his impact on the music world. Riz Ahmed uses his position as a rapper to engage in Political Rap, tackling significant social and political concerns while steadfastly attempting to combat and debunk false preconceptions about Muslims. In addition to his artistic pursuits, Riz is a fervent supporter of humanitarian causes, actively promoting awareness of and raising money for Syrian and Rohingya refugees. He is a great figure in the entertainment industry and as a caring global citizen thanks to his commitment to utilize his ability and influence for good.

### **Analysis: The Intersectional Concerns of the British-Muslim Asian Diaspora in the song, "The Breakup (Shikwa)"**

The album's first song, "The Breakup (Shikwa)," is a stunning monologue in which the narrator lyrically describes the agonizing experience of breaking up with a woman named

Brittany. The song goes into the nuances of their toxic relationship and paints a detailed picture of the challenges and heartbreak they had together through this honest and passionate statement. As the narrator navigates the emotional rollercoaster of the breakup afterwards, the listener is dragged into the narrator's world and empathizes with it. Within the song, a plethora of evocative metaphors vividly illustrate the historical and enduring mistreatment of South Asia by Britain, offering a poignant commentary on the colonial legacy and its lasting impact. The powerful imagery employed in the lyrics serves to expose the complex dynamics of imperialism, inviting listeners to confront the injustices and repercussions of this tumultuous history. It is thus crucial to visit the lyrics in detail in order to extract the layered meaning. Readers are advised that the lyrics contain some profanity words, and are quoted as such to not cause any miscommunication.

“Britain's broken up with me

We had our ups

But now it's broken down

Lemme break down the whole fuckery

F\*ck buddies turned toxic

Intertwined now we got kids

Built her up she left me broke

I can't believe I let her f\*ck with me”. (Ahmed, “The Breakup (Shikwa) Lyrics”)

The starting lines of the song sets up the rocky relationship between the Brittany, a visible metaphor for the entire Britain empire and the subsequent power structure, and the unnamed narrator who has been a colonial subject in the past. By referencing of Britain as a past lover, the narrator plays with the dual meaning of the ‘break-up’ both as the end of a toxic relationship and the current break-down of the country that can be observed in the news and media. Narrator is now addressing the concerning by breaking down this entire toxic

relationship in front of the listeners and illustrate how the East India Trading Company, which first entered the India under the Royal Charter of 1603, in order to trade with the kings, and rich and influential people of the land. This trading then turned into a scheming colonization of the Indian territories during the 18th century. And now centuries later, the cultures of the east and the west have intermingled enough to produce 'kids', a new hybrid ethnicity, some the forefathers of whom were the immigrants that helped in the rebuilding process of the British infrastructure after the world wars, and other who were looted by the British for their resources.

"I was a mogul had the bling...

My stash was a quarter of the cash in the world

Then this stray pale chick came to trade...

She straight slithered

And then stayed I couldn't kick her out

She saw I was at war with myself...

So easy to divide and rule

Had me locked down

Beat me red and blue til I knew

Right was white and not brown ...

She moved in I was a guest

Unwanted in my own house...

Took my industry and independence from me

Took my dough, then lent me money".(Ahmed, "The Breakup (Shikwa) Lyrics")

which is the standard definition of someone who is a rich and influential person in a particular field. But it also denotes a member of the Muslim dynasty of the Mongol origin, who were the primary rulers of the India before the arrival of the East India Trading Company. The narrator is assuming the identity of the kings of the India who commanded the majority of the resources, wealth and the power. Their 'stash', or their GDP was about 25% of the world's total GDP before the Britain's arrival in India. But then the 'pale chick' Britain arrives and plants a firm hold in India using various cunning tactics and gaining influence with the locals. By the time Indian rulers realized the true nature of the Britain's intentions, it was too late to completely uproot them from the trade and political sphere. The Britain was able to achieve this as the India at that time was divided into many regional kingdoms that were constantly warring with each other for gains. The Britain saw the disharmony amongst the local and state leaders, and employed a tactic famously came to be known as the 'Divide-and-rule' policy. Britain then installed his own values, replacing the local customs, and banning many rituals and traditions as well in order to weaken the cultural sovereignty at the communal level, through the means of militaristic subjugation. They portrayed the British culture, customs, skin color, clothing and other such related things as being superior than the Indian counterpart of the same. The 'white' was now right, and the brown was wrong, the narrator further adds. This drastic atmospheric change resulted in the weakening of the Indian authority, and the paradigm shift where the everything 'British' was the only thing acceptable, and the Indians felt foreign in their own sphere. Britain took over the local industries, trading, resource management, other means of economy and was now the sole authority in deciding and allocating the said resources as they saw fit, rendering many locals and states helpless and forced to bargain with the Company for the very resources that were once theirs, drawing agreements of lending and then paying hefty fees for the use.

Further stanzas include more parallels between the historical trauma inflicted by the Britain in India. 'Beef with some German next man' alludes to the World War I, when tens of thousands of Indian soldiers were sent to the front lines in order to fight Germany. The trend continued to the World War II as well, where additionally to losing soldiers, India also 'lost my left hand', referring to the Bengal Famine of 1943 where millions of people starved due to Britain's decision to divert the rations to the soldiers instead. When India staged 'protest

peacefully', A Gandhian brand of Independence struggle through peaceful marches and non-violent protests, one of which is the famous Jallianwala Bagh peaceful gathering in 1919, where the British Raj 'got violent' and massacred around 379 people as per the official records, although many other reports present contesting numbers. The incident is attributed by many scholars as the final straw that united the entire India against the British Rule in India and paved the way for the Britain to exit the India in 1947. But before Britain existed, it delivered the final blow that would forever mark the Indian subcontinent, by causing the India-Pakistan partition, 'carved a scar down my middle just to leave me stretched out', and the subsequent Kashmir issue, which has not resolved till date, as expressed by the lines 'My cashmere jumper's still stained red'.

This is where the involvement of Britain in India ends. But the song does not stop here, as it continues on to now describe the conditions of Asian migrants in the Britain, especially the Muslim community. The British Nationality Act of 1948 allowed around 800 million subjects to live and work in the UK without the need of any visa. The migration was encouraged to help rebuild the fallen economy and infrastructure after suffering two rounds of World Wars, and 'rush like a wind', which refers to the HMT Empire Windrush which carried the West Indian migrants to the shores of UK. The values of 'White Supremacy' that was installed centuries earlier, was still internalized by the migrants and they felt inferior to the other UK residents. Nevertheless gradually, a new ethnicity was formed from the eventual co-habitation, came to known as the 'British-Asian Muslim Diaspora' who are at the center of the narrative. But soon the community realized that the dream of 'multiculturalism' was false and in reality, there was a growing disdain being harbored by the British society towards the community. The "new kids" born in their own country were left feeling lost, ignored, and even reviled by the Britain. When the Britain regained control and tried to forcefully remove and persecute the community, it attempted to reduce British Muslims to second-class citizens, shattering the once-optimistic ideal of a multicultural society(Siddique)

The arguments used to support this prejudice were frequently based on stereotypes and include allusions to terrorism, worries about unpredictability, and resource-deficiency. Britain spread the false myths by portraying the narrator as a dangerous threat who is insane and revengeful. These actions had devastating consequences that resulted in widespread death, deportation, jail, and exile. The long-lasting effects of this violence left the communities it affected with scars and made it clear how urgent it is to redress such injustices in society. The

lines 'Snipers taking the shots' before the narrator had any 'time to explain to them' capture the spirit of marginalized communities' efforts against discrimination and societal constraints and provide a powerful picture of the challenges they encounter. The narrator ends on the note that the ongoing violence will result in drastic changes, where either the Britain will come to realize the error of their ways and assimilate the community, or annihilate the entire diaspora, leading to a complete 'break up.

### **Role of Trauma, Memory and Identity**

The song 'The Breakup (Shikwa)' is although the main song in the album 'The Long Goodbye', it is far from the complete message of the artist. There are 14 other tracks, some sung by other guest artists as well such as Mindy Kaling, Mahershala Ali, Hasan Minhaj, Jay Sean, Asim Chaudhry and a sum total length of about 27 minutes. One of the other notable songs in the album is titled 'Toba Tek Singh', which is also the title of a short story written by Sadat Manto that explores the tragic consequences of the India-Pakistan partition and the innumerable lives lost during that turbulent time. The story takes place behind the walls of a mental hospital, where one of the patients claims to be from a place called Toba Tek Singh, which is situated on both sides of the Pakistani-Indian border. This succinct but moving story explores the complexity of identification and belonging while illustrating how partition affected people's lives and the long-lasting psychological toll it took on those caught up in the turmoil of history. The song's title choice matches it with the book's eerie story, highlighting the lasting effects of past traumas and the enormous impact historical events have on communities.

In the verses, the narrator expresses his contempt once more for the fictitious ex-girlfriend, recalling his former efforts to help and support her only to be met with betrayal as she now tries to damage him by raising the identical white flag of peace he once waved (Ahmed, "Toba Tek Singh Lyrics"). The narrator refuses to be driven away despite her attempts to do so and puts up walls, displaying his steadfast dedication to his identity and convictions. In spite of these difficulties, the narrator embraces his genuine self and refuses to let himself be limited by the walls that have been put up around him or defined by others. He does this to demonstrate his agency and to get strength from embracing and expressing his distinct individuality, which promotes a feeling of empowerment and liberation. The song champions



the value of being true to one's personality and ideals in the face of difficulty by capturing the nuances of personal growth and self-discovery despite adversity through this narrative.

The role of memory in shaping the identity thus becomes crucial and a central concern throughout the album where Riz Ahmed deftly connects the South Asian community's past trauma with current problems with hate and discrimination. He boldly draws attention to the deeply ingrained bigotry that has lasted over time by adopting a historical perspective. Inspiring listeners to imagine a sense of community and solidarity, this potent creative method challenges them to confront and draw lessons from this shared memory of tragedy. He successfully shows the hard realities of relocation suffered by the community by drawing comparisons to the events of the mid-20th century, providing insight into the seriousness of their current predicament. He encourages the audience to identify with the challenges of the past and realize how they continue to impact the experiences of the community today by going over these historical examples once more. Overall, Riz Ahmed's album is a powerful call to action that implores society to face its past, combat prejudice, and create a future that is more accepting of all people. The album then moves to the themes of reclamation of one's identity. The fourth track, "Fast Lava," embodies the idea of restoring strength and resilience with an upbeat and quick flow. As a bold proclamation of embracing one's identity and history, the catchy chorus, "I spit my truth and It's brown," challenges preconceptions and asserts the importance of representation and self-expression within the story (Ahmed, "Fast Lava Lyrics"). Through this energizing song, Riz Ahmed highlights the energy of cultural pride and the significance of varied voices in the face of hardship, celebrating the courage found in embracing one's truth.

Riz Ahmed deftly highlights the diasporic challenges of locating their identity in the song "Where you from." He emphasizes the difficulty of belonging and the need for a sense of rootedness in a globalized world with heartbreaking lyrics such as "if you want me back to where I'm from, then bruv, I need a map" and "Maybe I'm from everywhere but nowhere" (Ahmed, "Where You From Lyrics"). The phrase "Born under a sun that you made too hot for us" makes a strong allusion to the discrimination and systemic difficulties that the diaspora faces. This powerful song serves as a profound remark on the larger problems faced by not only by the diaspora in question, but every disadvantaged groups in society as. Its placement in the film bearing the same name as the album further emphasizes how important it was in establishing the plot and themes of the movie. Debjani Banerjee's article, which

explores the novel *Home Fire* written by Kamila Shamsie, echoes the similar atrocities and the loss of belonging. Banerjee expertly extracts the text's 'ability to center these discussions around citizenship rights, radicalization narratives and ways of belonging/unbelonging that makes it an energized text within the contours of transnational fiction'(Banerjee 299). The novel which echoes the classic 'Antigone' in a modern setting, works through the prism of transnational framework and navigate the intersecting trajectories of social, political and economic discourses. The text highlights the 'British multiculturalism and its failure and increased securitization to show the various ways in which these state maneuvers have replaced the rights of citizenship with citizenship as privilege'(299).

The song emphasizes the significance of recognizing and honoring varied identities while breaking the boundaries that strive to divide us by fusing potent storytelling and emotive music. The narrator valiantly makes an effort to define their distinct identity in the midst of a volatile environment while knowingly rejecting the restrictions of a conventional definition put out by the West. They aspire to embrace their real selves by defying social conventions and expectations in order to find freedom and empowerment outside of the boundaries of conventional categorizations. Riz embraces his Pakistani identity in the other songs, and asserts his rejection of a post-racial society by locating his cultural heritage and traditions that distinguishes him from the western civilization. The Britain knows this well, and according to Riz, is attempting to make the diaspora fight amongst themselves by pitting the young generation against the older generation. The young generation is increasingly being motivated to discard the old traditional values as regressive and obsolete, and trying to sever the cultural bond that otherwise might have acted as the fuse and the spark. The attempts of alienating the diaspora by deleting their unique identity by the Britain is laid bare in the songs. However, there is also an increase in the revivalist tendency amongst the younger generation who are holding onto these identities and cultural markers. Riyaz Timol explores such threads of the modern institutions such as Tablighi Jama'at and its work towards connecting the new generations of Muslims to their cultural roots. According to the author, it plays "important role in consolidating the faith identity of many first generation South Asian migrants, by functioning as a religious anchor in the new context and catalysing a national process of mosque-building"(Timol 355).

## **Conclusions**

I have meticulously investigated the complex allegories that shed light on the recurrent themes of violence and institutional oppression faced by the diaspora in my thorough examination of the album's many songs. Affirmative action must be taken immediately in order to reclaim their identities and achieve more political representation, the narrator skillfully emphasizes as they provide a devastating list of the injustices that their group has experienced. "We Malala don't stay down," the song's stirring final line, captures the fearlessness of today's youth and their will to rise up against oppression and fight for their rights. The narrator emphasizes the diaspora's resiliency and persistence in their pursuit of justice and equality by drawing inspiration from people like Malala Yousafzai, who bravely challenges the status quo.

The album's tracks act as both a reflection of the group's difficulties and a call to action for empowerment, motivating the diaspora to band together and fight back against the oppressive forces that want to trample on their identity and rights. A potent movement for good change and social justice is sparked by the narrative in the song, which addresses the terrible reality faced by oppressed people while simultaneously urging them to embrace their strength and agency. Riz Ahmed purposefully chose rap music as his medium so that he could tap into a style that has a strong cultural resonance with the younger generation. This gave him a wider and more relatable platform from which to deliver his potent thoughts. By utilizing this well-liked platform, he attempts to engage and connect with the general public in the hopes of motivating good change and igniting a shared desire for change among his listeners. Riz Ahmed wants to inspire young people to actively participate in fostering a more inclusive and just society by igniting dialogue, bringing attention to important issues, and fostering a sense of empowerment through his music.

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### Author's bio-note

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