



# The supply, promotion and readership of minority ethnic English language fiction in the UK: a review of the literature

*Ponudba, promocija in bralci leposlovja, katerega avtorji so pripadniki etničnih manjšin, v angleškem jeziku v Veliki Britaniji: pregled literature*

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Written largely from a UK perspective, this paper presents a review of the literature regarding the nature of minority writing in the English language, and its supply, promotion and readership.

**Methodology/approach:** Following an initial exploration of the diverse terminology used to describe such fiction, the main body of the review is structured according to the five potential elements of the minority ethnic fiction supply chain – the author, the book trade, the library supplier, the public library, the reader – with an attempt to bring together the principal academic and professional texts published on each subject.

**Results:** This paper has raised two main issues of concern: firstly, that very little empirical research has been conducted into minority ethnic fiction – in particular regarding its readership, and secondly, that previous research has tended to focus on linguistic aspects of minority ethnic fiction stock provision and use, rather than on cultural aspects.

**Research limitation:** Given the nature of the broader empirical research of which this review forms a part, the paper is almost entirely focused on English language fiction only.

**Originality/practical implications:** Reviews in this field have not previously tended to take into account all five elements of the minority ethnic fiction supply chain, or in par-

ticular the readership of such fiction. These previous omissions have been addressed in the present paper.

**Keywords:** *reading culture, ethnic minorities, fiction, public libraries, Great Britain*

## Izveleček

**Namen:** Prispevek, napisan predvsem z britanskega zornega kota, prinaša pregled literature na temo ponudbe, promocije in bralcev leposlovnih del v angleškem jeziku v Veliki Britaniji, katerih avtorji so pripadniki etničnih manjšin.

**Metodologija/pristop:** Prispevek v uvodu obravnava različne termine, ki opisujejo to leposlovje, glavni del pa je usmerjen v pet členov, ki predstavljajo verigo ponudbe in povpraševanja: avtor, knjigotržec (knjigarna), dobavitelj, splošna knjižnica, bralec. V prispevku skušamo predstaviti najpomembnejša znanstvena in strokovna besedila, ki obravnavajo posamezne člene v tej verigi.

**Rezultati:** Prispevek ugotavlja dve skrb vzbujajoči dejstvi: prvič, da je bilo na temo leposlovja, katerega avtorji so pripadniki etničnih manjšin, doslej narejenih zelo malo empiričnih raziskav, predvsem z vidika bralcev, in drugič, da so se predhodne raziskave osredotočile predvsem na jezikovni vidik in uporabo, ne pa na kulturni pomen tega leposlovja.

**Omejitve raziskave:** Glede na to, da ta pregled predstavlja del širše empirične raziskave, je prispevek skoraj v celoti osredotočen le na leposlovje v angleškem jeziku.

**Izvirnost/uporaba:** Predhodne raziskave na to temo niso upoštevale vseh pet členov v verigi ponudbe in povpraševanja po leposlovju, katerega avtorji so pripadniki etničnih manjšin, predvsem niso upoštevale bralcev tega leposlovja. Te pomanjkljivosti smo odpravili v pričujočem prispevku.

**Ključne besede:** *bralna kultura, etnične skupine, leposlovje, splošne knjižnice, Velika Britanija*

## 1 Introduction: the changing UK cultural profile

Data from the most recent UK Census – held on 27 March 2011 – showed the total population of England and Wales at that time to be almost 56.1 million (Office for National Statistics, 2014), a growth of 7% since the previous Census in April 2001. Of this total, 80% were white British, a reduction of 7% since the previous Census, and 11.9% belonged to ‘other ethnic groups’. Within this second group, the ‘Asian’ respondents (including Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi and ‘other Asian’) formed 6.8% of the total, and the ‘black’ respondents were 3.4% of the total, each representing population growths since 2001 of 2.4% and 1.2% respectively (Owen, 2012).

It is now felt by many social commentators that the concept of ‘multiculturalism’, ‘the policy or process whereby the distinctive identities of the cultural groups within such a society are maintained or supported’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016), has not been entirely successful within the UK. Author and former radical Islamist Ed Husain described the impact of multiculturalism as ‘mono-cultural outposts in which the politics of race and religion were now being played out before my eyes’ (Husain, 2007, p. 282). The outcome of the June 2016 EU Referendum, as a result of which the UK voted to leave the European Union by 51.9% to 48.1%, is also felt by many to have resulted in an increase in racist behaviour in the country, with Versi (2016) noting that it has ‘unleashed a Pandora’s box of bigotry and Islamophobia – one that will require strong collective action to close’. However, in stark contrast to this is Kwei-Armah’s perception that British society has successfully absorbed what he describes as ‘new Britain’ and ‘old Britain’, arguably overcoming the ‘incompatibility’ and ‘separation’ described above:

‘I think that one of the beautiful things about living in Britain right now is that the new Britain and the old Britain can co-exist, it can co-exist and co-exist comfortably.’ (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2011)

Which of these different perspectives of British society is reflected in the reading of the literature emerging from its minority ethnic communities? Are such texts produced and enjoyed only in Husain’s ‘mono-cultural outposts’, or is there felt to be a wider reading audience for a work which does indeed ‘co-exist comfortably’ with all English language fiction? In an attempt to explore this further, a review has been conducted of the literature pertaining to the nature, supply, promotion and readership of minority ethnic fiction, considering the nature of the public library service in a culturally diverse society, and its provision of reading materials for and concerning diverse communities. The majority of the literature presented here originates from the UK – and relates in the main to English language fiction – but the paper also draws from other sources to enable a wider investigation of the subject. The acronym ‘BME’ is frequently employed in this paper, which refers to ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’, and is the terminology commonly (although not necessarily satisfactorily) used in the UK to describe people of non-white descent.

## **1.1 The nature of minority writing in the English language**

Whereas many works of fiction fall perhaps more comfortably into accepted fiction ‘genres’ because of their obvious plot and character similarities – Romance, Crime, Fantasy, etc. – it is not so straightforward to consider as a group all works of fiction by ‘black British’ authors, for example. Is it appropriate to describe such

works as a genre, when they could arguably belong in several genre classifications, depending on the subject matter? Would separating these titles in this way somehow reinforce a perception that the books should not be regarded as part of the 'mainstream' body of English language fiction? Despite these concerns, it is relatively common for a number of the key stakeholders in this article – publishers, booksellers, library suppliers and public libraries – to use the following terms in promoting the relevant titles to the UK reading public:

- 'Minority ethnic English language fiction' describes any work of fiction produced by a member of a minority ethnic community, who chooses to write in the English language
- 'Black British fiction' is defined as fiction written by an author of African-Caribbean or African heritage, living and publishing work in Britain
- 'Asian fiction in English' is defined as fiction written in the English language by an author of Indian subcontinent heritage, living and publishing work in Britain.

In the preface to a volume commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in Tilbury in June 1948 (Wambu, 1998), novelist E. R. Braithwaite writes of the 'black men and women' who 'continued to write of the agony and ecstasy of living in a society which had long been conditioned to view them as less than equal'. In doing so, he adds, 'they wrote of the British society as they found it, distressingly alien, yet painfully familiar' (p. 17). More recently, in a study of what is termed 'British Asian fiction', Murphy and Sim (2008) describe such fiction as that which recounts authors' 'personal experiences of negotiating multiple British identities' (p. 218). Finally, in an article reporting on an Arts Council England initiative to attract more people from black and minority ethnic communities to the publishing industry, Neel (2006) lists authors Monica Ali, Diana Evans and Tash Aw as examples of writers 'whose experience of coming from two worlds forms an essential backdrop to their work.' Each of these demonstrates the identity conflicts which, in combination, have arguably helped to shape 'minority writing' as we understand it today.

The primary intention of grouping 'Black British fiction' and 'Asian fiction in English' – as distinct from any other fiction genre – was to facilitate their examination for this review and the empirical research of which it forms a part (Birdi, 2011; Birdi & Syed, 2011; Birdi 2014), using terms with which both research participants and the readers of this paper would hopefully be familiar, or would at least be able to understand.

The design of the paper has been informed by the supply-demand model (Henderson, 1941), as an aid to understanding the position of each stakeholder involved in the reading of, and engagement with, minority ethnic English language

fiction. This aided an investigation of the extent to which such minority writing is made available to its readers (the *supply*), and the extent to which it is required by the different agencies in the supply chain, be they authors, publishers, booksellers, library staff or, in particular, the readers (the *demand*).

## 2 Supply Chain Part I: the authorship of Black British and Asian fiction

Historically, fiction in the English language was almost exclusively canonical in nature and Western in focus, a body of work that was central to the cultural dominance of the British Empire. Authors from other cultures writing in the English language who were felt to threaten the exclusive nature of this literature were essentially forced to ‘immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become *more English than the English*’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989, p. 4).

This cultural hegemony is felt to exist even today, as although Britain has lost much of its global power, the continued recognition of the literary canon means that ‘the weight of antiquity continues to dominate cultural production in much of the post-colonial world’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989, p. 7). However, the form of this dominance is changing and, as it is no longer possible to deny the achievements and impact of post-colonial authors – in particular from South Asia and Africa – there has been a move to incorporate their work within the Western body of literature. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989, p. 7) suggest, ‘employing Eurocentric standards of judgement, the centre has sought to claim those works and writers of which it approves as British’. This idea of ‘incorporation’ is taken further by Salman Rushdie in an essay written in 1983 (Rushdie, 1992, p. 61), in which he writes of the ‘ghetto’ into which he and other authors felt themselves to have been placed, writing in the English language, but ‘occupying...a position on the periphery’ of the body of English literature.

The English language and literature we have in the UK today is inevitably a hybrid of European and indigenous cultures and forms (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989; Williams, 1999). Given the global impact of colonisation it would be reasonable to assert that the literature which originates from a post-colonial author or nation would be affected by the process in some way. Cooper (2013) illustrates this by referring to a ‘postcolonial imperative’ felt by many postcolonial African writers to ‘use language differently’ when writing in European languages, in order to ‘make it express their realities’.

We can therefore assume that authors who are defined by the publishing industry as ‘Black British’ or ‘(British) Asian’ would have been similarly affected by colonisation, and that they would be more likely than white British authors to reflect, in their writing, on issues of ethnicity. For the post-colonial author writing in the English language there can be what Mercer (in Procter, 2000, p. 7) describes as a ‘burden of representation’, meaning that he or she may feel obliged to attempt to redress the balance of previous Eurocentric work, in which the non-white communities may have been marginalised and misrepresented: ‘This has created a burden of representation in which the narration of black Britain feels problematic pressure to delegate, or “speak for” the whole of that imagined community (Procter, 2000, p. 7).’

Certainly, author Salman Rushdie (1992, p. 67) writes of the ‘bogy of Authenticity’, suggesting that the concept is only applied to the work of authors writing within the ‘ghetto’ into which ‘Commonwealth writers’ are automatically placed by the West. As he suggests, ‘the term [‘Authenticity’] ...would seem ridiculous outside this world. Imagine a novel being eulogized for being “authentically English”, or “authentically German”. It would seem absurd. Yet such absurdities persist in the ghetto’. Interestingly, there has been a more recent discussion as to whether any author should attempt to portray in his or her writing a community to which he or she does not ‘belong’: in the opening address at the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival celebrated author Lionel Shriver (2016) defended her right to do so, angrily observing ‘The ultimate endpoint of keeping our mitts off experience *that doesn’t belong to us* is that there is no fiction’.

### 3 Supply Chain Part II: the book trade

A review of the reading of, and engagement with, minority ethnic fiction within the public library service should also take into account the publishing industry from which the books originate and, to a lesser extent, the bookselling industry with which it shares a readership. As Ishida (2009, p. 9) observes: ‘among all potential partner organizations, only the book trade shares the same primary aim with public libraries: that is, to encourage the public to read.’ Book trade commentator Dennys writes (in Bookseller, 2006, p. 3), ‘The emergence of Britain as a multicultural, multi-ethnic society clearly has implications for the nation’s publishers and booksellers, in terms of both what they produce and how they sell it’. He refers to the ‘growing and important market’ for ‘progressive’ publishers and booksellers, and the ‘huge potential source of writing talent’ from within the minority ethnic communities. Korte and Sternberg (2004, p. 9) suggest that black and Asian cultural ‘products’ have recently enjoyed ‘widespread appeal both to

majority audiences in Britain and audiences abroad', referring to the 'unprecedented success of black and Asian fiction on the book market'. Writing from a US perspective, librarian Van Fleet (2003, p. 70) observes that although 'work by authors of color' was previously difficult to identify and acquire [from publishing houses], it has now increased substantially in 'number of titles, popularity, and availability'.

Certainly, Sanderson (2001, p. 26) suggests that with 'a growing number of black and Asian titles on the shelves it would be easy to conclude that ethnic literature had finally escaped the publishing ghetto', and Neel (2006) comments that a visitor to a mainstream bookshop 'might think that cultural diversity in the UK publishing sector is alive and well'. And based on what she describes as the 'visible success' of bestselling authors such as Monica Ali, Andrea Levy and Zadie Smith, Bury (in Bookseller, 2006, p. 8) proposes that 'talented writers have an equally good chance of commercial success regardless of their ethnicity'.

However, Bury (in Bookseller, 2006, p. 6) admits that 'authors from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups wrote only 50 of the top 5,000 bestselling books during the 13 weeks to 1<sup>st</sup> April [2006], in other words, 1%.' Reporting the results of a survey conducted by trade journal *The Bookseller* in the same year to investigate the commissioning by UK publishers of BME authors, she notes that although most publishers perceive that there is a black and minority ethnic audience for the books they produce, 'the majority (72%) avoid commissioning books specifically for any ethnic group' (Bookseller, 2006, p. 6).

This perceived lack of market segmentation is in line with the opinion of sociologists Wood and Landry (2008, p. 153), who write of the 'increasing standardization' in the retail market as a whole, 'especially by mass chains who seek to acculturate their diverse customers to a common standard and uniform level of product'.

In a study of African Caribbean library services, Alexander (1982, p. 13) observed that the main UK publishing houses 'continue to be in Euro-American control, protecting the cultural interests of the majority of the book buying public', and therefore that insufficient attention was paid to the Black cultural perspective. Unfortunately, this viewpoint can still be found in the twenty-first century: Peters (2000) interviewed a Chief Librarian who felt that British-based African Caribbean authors were still having difficulty finding a publisher for their work, suggesting that publishers 'publish what they *think* they can sell and...more of what they *know* they can sell' (p. 48). Research conducted into the factors influencing new book purchase by D'Astous, Colbert and Mbarek (2006, p. 143) found that the reputation of the publisher 'had a positive and significant impact on consumer

interest'. Clearly, if book buyers are tending to choose books from well-known publishing houses, it is potentially more difficult for the minority publishers and authors to establish themselves.

At a radical black publishing conference in 2007 (see Busby, 2007), members of a publisher panel commented on the current state of Black and Asian publishing in the UK. It was noted that there is some mainstream publishing of Black and Asian authors' work, but that this is by no means widespread. What, then, is the role of the Black or minority ethnic publisher? For Busby (2007), whether mainstream or subsidiary, those in the publishing industry should demonstrate a commitment not only to showing black and minority ethnic characters in its books, but also to supporting black and minority ethnic authors. As she states, 'Blackness is not monolithic...we need many kinds of publishers to reflect the range of black experiences and people'. More recently, Flood (2015) described the UK publishing industry as 'almost blindingly white', reporting an interview with the award-winning black novelist Bernardine Evaristo who had noted 'a return to the literary invisibility of the past, concealed by a deceptive tokenism'.

#### **4 Supply Chain Part III: library suppliers**

The two principal methods of current stock selection for UK public libraries are supplier selection, where the library supplier selects the stock for the library in accordance with specifications drawn up by the library authority, and online approvals, where the library staff select materials from a list provided via the supplier's website. Library suppliers have long been involved in providing the more popular authors and titles to library authorities across the UK, but in recent years far more selection decisions have been delegated to these agencies than before, with an increasing number of library services requesting that the supplier selects the majority of – or even all – materials on their behalf.

It has been argued that the greater use of suppliers by library services increases public library staff time to spend on other aspects of their work (Goulding, 2006, p. 315; McMenemy, 2009, p. 66; Van Riel, Fowler & Downes, 2008, p. 13), and Goulding (2006, p. 314) gives the positive example of one library service who claimed that the 'range and depth of coverage of adult fiction on those areas of stock selected by their supplier (independent publishers and male appeal) were impressive.' However, criticisms frequently made of this method of stock selection are that it may lead to an unbalanced collection, favouring certain subject areas over others (Chapman, Creaser & Spiller, 2000), that the breadth of the stock will generally be reduced (Cole and Usherwood, 1996; Curry, 1997; Damiani,

1999; Usherwood, 2007) and that selection decisions are taken ‘out of the hands of staff trained to provide a varied stock’ (Goulding, 2006, p. 315). As a result, public libraries could suffer from ‘unadventurous stock selection’ (Usherwood, 2007, p. 28) and a resulting ‘conservative range of books’ (McKearney, in Goulding, 2006, p. 315). Damiani (1999, p. 112), while claiming that the librarian’s ‘ideal’ would be ‘to reach a wide representation of subjects, genres and styles in the stock’, observes that if library suppliers continue to bias their selection to the more ‘popular’ (i.e. best-selling) titles, the tension between ‘the ideal of a varied and representative stock and the reality of limited choices’ may never be resolved. For the selection of titles written by minority ethnic authors, many of which will be published by the smaller, less ‘mainstream’ publishing houses, the above issues could be particularly problematic.

Atton (1994, p. 61) suggests that a lack of library staff awareness of minority stock is part of the problem as, he argues, ‘the small press cannot compete with the mainstream publisher in bringing their publications to the attention of librarians’. Citing a library supplier who refers to the ‘sales and marketing failures’ of these smaller presses as the reason for titles being omitted from library supplier lists, he proposes that there are ‘far from “a few titles” missed by library suppliers’ (Atton, 1994, p. 61). Atton also gives an additional reason for titles being excluded, namely that many titles from smaller publishers are ‘not spined, or do not meet other standards of presentation...photocopied and stapled booklets are unlikely to get past a shop’s buyer or a library supplier’ (Atton, 1994, p. 61), a view which is also reflected in Akhtar (1984, p. 121). Related to this, Van Riel, Fowler and Downes (2008, p. 119) describe library stock policies in which ‘the most precise definitions [of quality] referred to what is most easily measurable, for example, the quality of paper and the quality of the binding, while avoiding any engagement with the content between the covers!’

## **5 Supply Chain Part IV: public libraries**

Data collected on behalf of DCMS (2010), based on surveys with a representative sample of 5000 people in England aged 15 and over, indicated that 41% of Black respondents used public libraries, 38% of Asian respondents, 49% of respondents of ‘mixed origin’, and 39% of White respondents. Writing in 2001 Hawkins, Morris and Sumsion report that ‘members of ethnic minorities...[are] more active users than their proportion of the population would suggest’ (p. 261), and in 2002 Skot-Hansen describes the public library as ‘undoubtedly the cultural institution with which most representatives of ethnic minorities are in touch’ (p. 12). Furthermore, Atkins (1988, p. 573) argues that public libraries have ‘progressed

in their thinking' in order to become 'responsive to the client [*every person who lives within the catchment area of the library*] rather than the user [*the person who actually enters the library*].' These comments are in contrast, however, to Alexander's (1982, p. 6) view that 'librarianship's previous failure to respond positively and effectively to Black settlers was in part due to the indifference of sectors of that community to public library provision'; to Roach and Morrison's (1997, p. 433) reporting of an 'ambivalent attitude towards the library service' by minority ethnic people surveyed for their research; to Usherwood and Linley's (2000, p. 78) finding that elected members believed that minority ethnic communities 'under-used the library'; and to Pateman's (2008) more recent comment that public libraries were actively used by a minority of the population which is 'predominantly middle-class, female, white and middle-aged' (p. 5).

One of the earliest references to UK library services to minority ethnic communities was by Lambert (1969), who reports findings of survey sent to 50 public library authorities in 1967 to investigate the extent of, and attitudes towards, provision for communities from India and Pakistan. At that time, 33 of the 50 responding authorities were making some provision of Indian language books, and of those not making any provision an unspecified number were 'emphatic' that 'in the interest of encouraging integration rather than segregation books in the mother tongues should not be supplied' (p. 42). In an edited volume entitled 'Library services to the disadvantaged', Croker (1975) again focused specifically on South Asian immigrants. The first large-scale piece of research into the provision of public library services for all minority ethnic communities in Britain was conducted shortly afterwards by Clough and Quarmby (1978), who included participants from a diverse range of backgrounds in their study. They aimed to produce a national picture of services, but acknowledged cultural differences between the participants, separating the major communities and providing background cultural information for each. Both texts were produced a relatively short time after a period of major immigration, and as a consequence focused almost exclusively on participants who were born outside the UK. Croker, for example, refers to her subjects as 'newcomers', and considers that ethnic minority provision at the time is regarded as a temporary affair, with library staff believing that demand will eventually 'taper off' (1975, p. 127).

In 1981, Coleman writes when library staff are starting to address the permanence of the issue. She recognizes that there are concerns particular to members of minority ethnic communities who were born in the UK, suggesting that there can be 'an increasing emphasis placed on traditional culture, the mother-tongue, and religion' (1981, p. 25). She also begins to formulate the notion, touched upon by Clough and Quarmby (1978), that minority ethnic service provision has a role not just for the communities themselves, but also for white people. Despite this more

progressive view, in 1984 it was still being reported (Henry, 1984, p. 9) that library services to minority ethnic communities were being ‘marginalised’ and ‘isolated’ from the mainstream service. Furthermore, it has also been suggested that librarianship has not successfully celebrated incoming cultures, but has instead focused its efforts on assimilating immigrants into mainstream culture (Berry, 1999), in their traditional role as ‘agents of acculturation’ (Mercado, 1997, p. 119).

In the 1990s, Alexander (in Alexander and Knight, 1992, p. 2) wrote that the policies and strategies of public libraries should enable ‘legitimate and “free” access to the range of services required by our communities, and that those very same services reflect the cultural diversity of modern society’. Dewjee (in Alexander and Knight, 1992, p. 47) also offers that ‘multi-cultural library services do not benefit only Black people; they are equally important for White people’. Similarly, in 2003 Elkin quotes the Head of Community Libraries for Birmingham Library Services at the time, who suggests that the public library service should be ‘pushing at people’s awareness and perceptions of society, promoting thinking on diversity and cultural awareness, and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to read broadly’ (p. 137). Despite this description of the ‘ideal’, Elkin writes, this librarian feels that today’s service is not engaging with this role, ‘reflecting the national lack of interest in promoting the strengths of a multicultural society’ (p. 137), and Nilsson (2003, p. 14) describes public libraries as ‘in reality a far cry from integration’. And although authors such as Davies (2008, p. 5) state that ‘Libraries should reflect the society that they serve and should be welcoming places to all sections of the community’, Audunson (2005) nonetheless describes the significant challenge faced by today’s public library service of ‘achieving cultural community and accepting and promoting cultural diversity’ (p. 432). More recently, Vincent (2009) reflected on developments in UK public library provision for Black and minority ethnic communities during the 40 years since Lambert’s previously mentioned 1969 article. He observed that some of the problems identified by Lambert remain today, including ‘the lack of real communication with parts of our communities’ (p. 144).

## **5.1 The provision of materials for diverse communities**

Datta and Simsova (1989, p. 43) commented that readers from UK minority ethnic communities felt that the library service ‘does not care or that it lacks the competence necessary to supply them with the books they want’, and Berry (1999, p. 112) later emphasised the importance of delivering a ‘culturally competent’ library service, suggesting that minority cultures are not understood in any depth by library staff, and that in addition staff ‘seldom learned the languages or collect the literature of these minorities’. Delaney-Lehman (1996, p. 29) suggests

that 'traditionally, library collections have been rather one-sided, leaning heavily towards the works of white European males'.

In 1996 Tyerman found that the provision of a multilingual library service was considered to be essential by some ethnic minority groups. As Birdi, Wilson and Mansoor (2012, p. 126) state, 'today's minority ethnic communities...may speak the languages of their mother countries, but their greater command of the English language as a result of having been through the UK education system means that foreign-language reading may no longer be a priority.' With the focus having shifted from the linguistic to the cultural, the priority of the second, third and even fourth generation minority ethnic communities may now be 'to satisfy their curiosity to explore the culture of their mother country', but also 'to see their experiences of a multi-ethnic Britain reflected in books they read' (Birdi, Wilson and Mansoor, 2012, p. 126). This view is supported by Mercado (1997, p. 120) who summarises: 'Integration with the civic culture of a nation does not mean the wholesale rejection of the culture, attitudes, values and language of the nation from which one has emigrated'.

In the 1970s, it was suggested that the provision of materials for diverse communities could be divided into two categories, 'those which are aimed at meeting the needs of minority groups and those consciously designed to reflect a multi-cultural society' (Library Advisory Council, 1977). In line with the theory of multiculturalism that society becomes richer as one's cultural horizons are expanded (Parekh, 2000; Sturges, 2004), it has also been suggested that there may be a benefit to all members of the community of being exposed to materials about other ethnic cultures, as part of the reflection of a culturally diverse society (Elkin, 2003; Guerena and Erazo, 2000).

Referring in particular to the South Asian communities, Akhtar (1984, p. 120) offers that those books which are 'aimed at acquainting the host population with the cultural, religious and historical backgrounds of ethnic minorities, have the potential to enable libraries to succeed where others have not made much headway.' Such material has the capacity not only to build 'a bridge of understanding between different communities' but, he feels, have also 'given Asian readers a sense of pride and security'. Simsova (in Zielinska and Kirkwood, 1992, p. 31) also refers to the capacity of material 'about the old country in the new language' as 'a kind of bridge'. Even in the 1960s, the importance had already been noted of providing children with 'access to good books about their own countries, as well as some books in their own languages': Lambert (1969, p. 52) termed this 'psychological continuity'. Related to this, however, Barter (1996, p. 13) warns that library staff and teachers should not fall into what he describes as the 'particularist' trap,

whereby an assumption is made that the only role of 'multicultural literature' is 'to bolster esteem and cultural pride' among their students.

Research into the capacity of fiction reading to increase intercultural understanding and/or to reduce racial prejudice has frequently focused on children and young people as readers. One of the most frequently cited attempts to classify multicultural books for young readers was produced by Sims Bishop in 1982. This was a taxonomy of cultural specificity as reflected in multicultural books, in this case focusing on African American culture. As Sims Bishop's co-author Cai (2002) explains, the classification she developed 'reflects two ways to approach an individual culture in literature: to focus either on peculiarities that are unique to an individual culture or on similarities that are shared by other cultures' (p. 22). Under the first approach would be grouped 'culturally specific' books, and under the second would be grouped 'generically American' and 'culturally neutral' books (pp. 23-4). Gopalakrishnan (2011) writes specifically of multicultural children's literature, and the need for such books to permeate the school curricula, 'to give children a way to validate their feelings and experiences; to create understanding, empathy, and tolerance; to break debilitating stereotypes; to give equal voice and representation' (p. 34). Similarly, Martens et al. (2015) advocate the use of global literature with the youngest school learners to encourage them 'to respect and accept people who are different from themselves and break attitudes that are oppressive and prejudicial' (p. 610). More urgently, Brown (1990, p. 8), then Co-ordinator of the Early Years Trainers Anti-Racist Network, stated: 'If we do not acknowledge the contribution of Black people, their cultures, lifestyles and languages, we will continue to present our children and students with a false view of the world around them.'

In a UK study of library services in predominantly white areas, Mansoor (2006) found that the concept of multiculturalism, or pluralism, whereby 'incoming' cultures sit alongside existing cultures, was welcomed by respondents as a notion of public library service and stock provision, in particular because of its perceived capacity to increase mutual tolerance and understanding of cultures. This idea had previously been expressed by Whitehead (1988, p. 3), who stated the need for libraries to present fiction from other cultures 'to long established British residents', thereby 'challenging long-held prejudices and enlarging their sympathies and understanding beyond the narrow range of merely personal experience', and Peters (2000, p. 56) agreed that such material 'should be aimed at all users'.

At a general level, Usherwood and Toyne (2002) reported in a study of the value and impact of reading imaginative literature that readers interviewed for their research felt that reading improved their ability to relate to other people, even

that it had increased their understanding of people from other backgrounds and cultures.

## **5.2 The provision and promotion of Black British and British Asian fiction in public libraries**

Although Van Riel, Fowler and Downes (2008, p. 132) suggest that the ‘demand for Black writers [and gay writers] is lower in most libraries than in bookshops’, book trade journal *The Bookseller* reports the findings of research into bookselling and diversity claims in fact that ‘librarians are more directly in touch with black and minority ethnic readers than most other book trade professionals’ (Denny, in *Bookseller*, 2006, p. 10). Writing in 2003, Van Fleet comments that ‘the work of authors of colour’ tended in the past to be included in a public library collection only if it was classified as ‘literary fiction’, today such collections were including a broader range of ‘genre fiction by authors representing other cultural points of view’ (p. 67).

This does raise the issue of whether or not specific collections of black and Asian writing should be created in libraries and bookshops, or whether a more appropriate approach would be to integrate such titles with the general fiction stock. Woodward (2005, in Thompson, 2006, p. 47) suggests that an integrated approach may make it more difficult for a patron ‘who may already feel alienated from the library institution’. Reader development agency *Opening the Book* (2006b) recommends to library staff that a separate collection would enable them to ‘showcase the work of Black writers to show the range you have’, but warn that a separate section must include sufficient stock: ‘there is nothing worse than a sad collection of tatty out-of-date “ethnic” material.’ Talbot (1990, p. 503) also writes of the ‘inherent danger of marginalization and tokenism’ of the separate approach.

The promotion of minority ethnic fiction faces the same issue as the provision of same, in terms of determining the potential audience: are minority ethnic communities to be specifically targeted in the promotion of such books, or should libraries attempt to reach the entire population?

Durrani, Pateman and Durrani (1999) describe the work of the Black and minority Ethnic Stock Group (BSG) which was formed in Hackney Libraries in order to redress the ‘decline in the quality and quantity of service provision to black communities’ (p. 18), and made a deliberate attempt to promote all black material to these communities, including BME adult fiction in English. In their evaluation of the DCMS/Wolfson Public Libraries Challenge Fund 2000-1, Wallis, Moore and

Marshall (2004) report on three reader development projects which specifically targeted minority ethnic communities, the 'Bangladeshi Link', 'Black Inc' and the 'Turkish Community Readers' Project', which 'all met or exceeded their targets and raised the profile and use of the library service with the targeted minority community' (p. 19).

Other authors have written about promotions designed to reach not only members of BME communities, but also the population as a whole. Brumwell and Hodgkins (2003) describe the 2003 reading promotion 'black bytes', devised by reader development agency Opening the Book to promote the work of Black British writers in libraries in the East Midlands. Train (2003) reports the findings of a user survey which indicated that after the *black bytes* promotion had been installed in libraries 'Black British fiction was 4.3% less unpopular...which could suggest that the black bytes promotion had affected their [respondents'] response' (p. 40).

Beginning with a pilot phase in 2004-6, The Reading Agency brokered a national partnership between UK public libraries and the book trade, 'Reading Partners', via which to develop the market for fiction reading. In 2007 the focus of this initiative was the provision to, and development of, a minority ethnic readership in the UK, in a promotion called 'Reaching Readers', which aimed to help libraries and the book trade to 'understand the reading habits and market gaps for BME readers' and 'to inspire readers to widen their reading horizons and read British BME writers' (Reading Agency, 2008).

Although the promotions described within this section have focused on writers and/or readers from minority ethnic communities, Jamal (2003) warns of the danger of pigeonholing potential consumers simply because of their ethnicity, arguing that they are not likely to confirm either as a group or to a particular category: 'the notion of treating consumers as a homogeneous market segment becomes questionable' (pp. 1614-15). Danish authors Elbeshausen and Skov (2004, p. 131) also refer to the need to avoid 'cultural determinism or cultural projection' when delivering and promoting services, in other words to avoid making assumptions of what members of a minority ethnic group would want simply based on pre-conceptions regarding their culture of origin, rather than taking into account the 'alien context' in which they now live.

A reasonable approach to the promotion of minority ethnic fiction could therefore be to cease regarding such titles as additional to the overall library stock, or 'of minority interest', but instead to incorporate books by Black and Asian authors in any fiction promotion, as standard practice. As Opening the Book (2006a)

recommends to library staff: 'In any promotion that you do, you should plan to include a percentage and a range of work by Black and Asian writers'.

## 6 Supply Chain Part V: the readers of minority ethnic fiction

This paper has already pointed to a certain confusion regarding the authorship, publishing, location (in a library or bookshop) and promotion of minority ethnic fiction. The most confusing of all, however, appears to be the question of its readership: who is the intended and actual reader of Black British and Asian fiction in English, and what are the factors which influence his or her decision to read those books?

Writing about the state of black publishing, Sylge (1997, p. 28) describes the experience of Tony Fairweather, director of the Write Thing, a promoter of black writers, who was told by a prominent employee of a large publishing house that his business would not survive as 'the UK trade only sold books to white people because "black people don't read"'. Multicultural publisher Wilkins (in Horn, 2008) talks of a similar experience: 'people say "black people don't buy books", but that's crazy – it's wrong.' Fortunately, the literature confirms that this perspective is entirely inaccurate, and that people from minority ethnic communities not only read, but read widely. Indeed, Wabuke (2016) reports Dawn Davis, head of publishing house Simon & Schuster's 37 *Ink* imprint, who stated 'African American women are the largest group of readers in the country [in the US]'.

During the course of the 2007 UK Books for All promotion of black and minority ethnic authors in bookshops, book trade analyst Book Marketing Ltd. conducted interviews with 627 BME shoppers in 11 bookshops across London and Birmingham. Asked about their response to the promotion, 95% of participants felt that it was a good idea to promote the BME writers featured 'because they did not normally get enough publicity' (Holman, in Bookseller, 2007, p. 13). Reporting that two-thirds of participants were 'drawn to' books of African, Asian or Caribbean interest or background, it was noted 'Of course they buy other books too, but marketing books to people specifically based on their cultural background may prove to be a sound investment' (idem). Yet Squires (2012) notes that although the UK publishing industry has recently supported the critical and commercial success of certain postcolonial literary authors, it has been less successful at producing mass market books that appeal to BME readers in the UK.

Simsova (in Zielinska and Kirkwood, 1992, p. 29) suggest that 'ethnic readers... like reading new literature written by authors of their own community living in

the new homeland, because such literature embodies their own present experience, as literature from the old homeland cannot.' This relates to Squire's theory (1994) that 'response [to a text] is affected by prior knowledge and experience' (p. 640), that 'emotional involvement with a text is critical to understanding' (p. 641) and to Rosenblatt's (1983) theory that the reader brings to a book his or her own personality traits, memories, preoccupations and mood. It also relates to Appleyard's (1994, pp. 9-10) more cyclical idea that the reader brings to the text a series of 'expectations derived from a literary and life experience', and that the text then 'feeds back these expectations or it does not'. In this way, argues Appleyard (1994), there will be a sense of 'identification with the characters and the situations they are in' (p. 102).

In 2008 Hicks and Hunt reported the findings of research conducted with 514 members of the Harper Collins online Reader Panel (of mixed ethnicity) and 497 members of a second online consumer panel, all of BME origin. Based on the data collected, the authors claim, 'It is not true to say that BME readers read BME books per se' (p. 40), suggesting in fact that BME readers will most frequently read general bestselling titles. At the same time, Hicks and Hunt also suggest that their research points to an opportunity for the book trade to 'expand the range of books featuring characters, places and issues relevant to communities of BME readers, written by authors from these communities but also with appeal to the general readership' (2008, p. 40). Although inevitably driven to an extent by a financial imperative to increase sales, book trade commentator Sanderson (2001, p. 28) writes that in future the BME book market must grow 'beyond the confines of the specialist shop or section, even to the extent of targeting white readers.' Indeed, in a study of the African American novel, Thompson (2006) explores this idea of readership, suggesting that although Black fiction is inevitably linked to racial identity, it is not necessarily the case that every African American will seek to read the genre, nor that non-African American readers would not be interested in reading it. As he states, 'race could be among a variety of factors why a patron would want to enjoy reading Black fiction' (p. 46).

This relates to the idea expressed by some that British society has become more accepting of minority ethnic fiction as part of the mainstream culture: Val McDermid (2010) cites fellow lesbian author Sarah Waters, who speaks of 'a shift in people's perceptions of what constitutes British literature in the past few years', to the extent that 'it's not only lesbian and gay voices that have been welcomed into the mainstream, it's a range of ethnic voices too'. Waters attributes this paradigm shift to 'an opening up of British culture and a relaxing of British society'. Olden, Tseng and Mcharazo (1996, p. 16) suggest that just as British tastes in travel and food have developed in recent years, 'similarly taste in reading has widened'. Even in 1992 Kendall reported that adult fiction by Caribbean and African authors

was a popular reading choice of white, middle-class readers. More recently, Hicks and Hunt (2008, p. 40) underline the importance of recognising that authors from BME communities are also popular with the general reading market. At a more general level Ruppin (2009, p. 4), addressing the book trade, suggests that the reading public is now more willing than before to move away from the generic authors 'who dominate the charts', provided that they are given 'some guidance and encouragement'.

As we have seen, the literature is divided as to the identity of the minority ethnic fiction reader. Young (2006, p. 20) summarises the issue, writing of 'the problem of the double audience', by which he is referring both to those readers who are from the same ethnic group as the author (the 'insiders') and those who are not. As illustrated in section 5.2, a divided readership could be encouraged by the way in which books are shelved, whether as a separate 'black interest' (or similar) section, or as part of the overall collection. Yet proponents of the reader development approach would argue that all books are potentially for all readers, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, culture, or sexuality. Van Riel, Fowler and Downes (2008, p. 61) refer to the role of reader development to encourage the reader to let go of his or her 'prejudices and defences', including those 'rooted in a sense of difference of culture...', and thereby to 'open up a wider choice'. As Hicks and Hunt (2008, p. 40) argue, 'It is important to recognize that BME authors are popular with the reading market. Many well-known BME authors appeal strongly to non-BME readers interested in literary fiction and reading about other cultures'.

## **7 Summary, and related empirical research**

This paper has reviewed both academic and professional literature regarding the nature of minority ethnic fiction, and its supply, promotion and readership, and in doing so has raised two main issues of concern: firstly that very little empirical research has been conducted into minority ethnic fiction – in particular regarding its readership, and secondly that previous research has tended to focus on linguistic aspects of minority ethnic fiction stock provision and use, rather than on cultural aspects. The literature clearly shows that the terminology used to describe what we might term 'minority ethnic fiction' has been the subject of relatively widespread academic debate, with no real consensus having been reached. Certain authors (e.g. Thompson, 2006; Peters, 2000) express the view that the label applied to a particular genre should not necessarily reflect its readership. Much of the literature relating to the authorship of Black British fiction and Asian fiction in English is concerned with the question of authenticity; that authors from minority ethnic communities often feel obliged to reflect these

communities in the fiction they write, rather than having the freedom to present a totally imagined setting for their work. Regarding the book trade, the vast majority of the literature about minority ethnic fiction originates from within the book trade itself, in professional journal articles and reports. This reveals the relatively low profile of this type of fiction in both the publishing and bookselling industries, despite certain 'breakthrough' texts by more well-known authors. It proved difficult to find material written from a more objective perspective, and certainly to find academic research on the subject. Both academic research and the professional literature suggest that library suppliers are not always playing their role in providing minority ethnic fiction for public libraries, although some authors (Usherwood, 2007; Van Riel, Fowler & Downes, 2008) argue that library staff can also damage the supply chain with poor or ill-informed stock specifications.

The main body of academic literature in this field relates to the public library service, its provision of services to minority ethnic communities, and the supply of materials to those communities. Indeed, previous research in the field of public librarianship and minority ethnic communities has tended to focus on the services for non-vernacular speaking communities (Clough and Quarmby, 1978; Roach and Morrison, 1997). More recent research by the author (Birdi & Syed, 2011; Birdi, Wilson & Mansoor, 2012) has emphasised the role of public libraries in supporting members of minority ethnic communities for whom language may no longer be an issue, but for whom culture may still remain a primary concern.

To return to the supply-demand model introduced in section 1.1, we have seen that previous research has been quite limited in terms of the *demand* of the readership in particular, so in an attempt to address this omission three empirical studies were conducted by the author to investigate the readership of, and engagement with, minority ethnic fiction by public library users in particular. The first of these comprised a brief, quantitative survey of the reading habits and attitudes of public library users (n=1,047) within the English East Midlands region, and qualitative follow-up interviews with a smaller sample (n=21) of the sample population. Part of the intervention was an investigation of responses to a Black British fiction promotion installed in public libraries at the time (see Birdi and Syed, 2011). The second study applied personal construct theory and the associated repertory grid technique in order to generate a series of perceived characteristics of genre fiction readers, and expanded upon these characteristics in relation to the readers of two minority ethnic English language fiction genres (see Birdi, 2011). The third study was a quantitative analysis of provided construct ratings which built on the previous phase of the research to progress from investigating the idiosyncrasies of individual participant response to an examination of a larger population response (see Birdi, 2014). Triangulated with the findings of the literature review of which this paper presents an edited version, this empirical

work has enabled the development of a revised model of genre fiction reading. This is intended to facilitate the examination of the individual characteristics of the fiction reader, enabling a deeper understanding of the relationships between these characteristics, thereby building on previous reading models which would have tended to consider each one separately. Future publications will present this model, and describe its theoretical and professional contribution to the field of minority writing.

## 7.1 Final thoughts

In the days preceding and following the EU Referendum in the UK on 23 June 2016, there has been a certain amount of speculation regarding the impact of a 'Brexit' vote on the cultural industries. Holmes (2016) reports evidence that the majority of arts leaders were against the UK leaving the EU, and quotes Iain Bennet, a consultant working in the creative and digital industries in London, who noted 'Cultural exchange is the bedrock of arts – and of our civilisation. A post-Brexit Britain would be a sad, turned-in little place'. Given the necessarily international focus of much of the minority writing discussed in this paper, it seems reasonable to predict that the field of minority writing and publishing will be affected not only by the outcome of the vote, but by the actual withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, which is likely to take place by the end of December 2018. The design of future academic research in this field will need to take these changes into account.

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