I, Otherstani:
War on Terror and Defence of the Margins in Talha and Hamja Ahsan

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1. Introduction

> terrorist violence is explained as the outcome of something innate in Muslims: their racial character […] the cause of their violence is said to be Muslim culture, ideology or religion – a racial essence […] this logic is eventually genocidal (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 21, 26-27).

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan's recent book *Tangled in Terror* is founded on an idea shared with other scholars: the recent decades following the London bombings of July 7th, 2005,[1] have been polluted by a widespread Islamophobia, as the

[1] On July the 7th, 2005, in central London, "[f]our coordinated attacks on three tube trains and a double-decker bus killed 52 people and left several hundred injured in the worst single terrorist atrocity on British soil" (Grierson 2025, n.p.). Sivanandan (2006, 4-5) describes how formally integrated into British society the four bombers were, and concludes that the cause of the bombings "must be sought in the degradation and hopelessness of Muslim life in the here and now".

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epigraph above claims. In 2010 Featherstone, Holohan and Poole (173) reasoned about this de-politicised view of terrorism as an ideological process which ends up covering the real roots of the phenomenon, that is to say the insecurity produced by neo-liberalism. Sadly, twelve years later Manzoor-Khan offers a similar analysis – including a reference to genocide which carries a blood-chilling prophetic connotation today. Several times in her book, Manzoor-Khan insists that the origins of Islamophobia are colonial (2022, 8-23); they may also be seen as a recent development of the orientalism described by Edward Said, who indicated the stereotypical association between fundamentalism and Islam, an association not always made in the case of other religions which also display traces of fundamentalism (Said 1997, xvi).

The second part of this article focuses on the laws and policies which have been fostering Islamophobia in Britain, and on their fallout on British Muslims; it then moves to the 2003 Extradition Act as one of the decisive contributions to this general atmosphere of racial injustice. The third part concentrates on the ordeal experienced by Talha Ahsan, one of the victims of the Extradition Act, and above all on the creative response represented by his poetry; he broadens the scope to reflect on various forms of otherness (such as his being autistic), when not on the concept of otherness itself. The fourth part of this article examines how Talha Ahsan's brother, the writer-artist and activist Hamja Ahsan, developed these ideas in *Shy Radicals*, where concerns for marginal subjectivities are taken to their extreme consequences through convincing (and sometimes provocative) claims.

Overall, this article argues for the need to focus on the importance of creative responses to terrorism and the war on terror in Britain – a subject which, in my view, has been understudied so far. The rationale behind the choice of Talha and Hamja Ahsan as my case studies lies in the emblematic nature of their personal and artistic ordeal. The manifold connections between their histories and their artistic productions bring to the fore, as the following paragraphs show, the urgency of an intersectional approach capable of examining formal/theoretical aspects and political issues at once. This is meant to be especially evident in the

Conclusion of this article, where the works by these two authors are considered as imaginatively coalescing the critical power of margins and Britain's contemporary atmosphere resulting from the so-called war on terror, which has been restricting space for all forms of dissent.

2. Post-7/7 Islamophobia and British Anti-terror Policies

As early as 2006, Ambalavaner Sivanandan (novelist and head of the Institute of Race Relations) was warning the public about the discriminating measures that were being increasingly adopted by British institutions, criminalising minority groups. Just like the previous SUS Laws against black youths, anti-terror laws meant targeting specific categories "not for an actual offence, but for being likely to commit one" (Sivanandan 2006, 4). These strategies *à la Minority Report* (Bigo 2006, 140) have produced a large-scale arbitrariness among those who implemented them, leaving room for many forms of discrimination. Sixteen years after Sivanandan's article, Manzoor-Khan's *Tangled Terror* shows how deep and how far these policies have reached. In her chapter "Racist Prediction as Public Duty" she examines how the Prevent programme, introduced in 2003 and made law in 2015, has been legally forcing public sector workers "to participate in national security policing and monitoring". The dystopian atmosphere, then, added Orwell to Philip Dick. These workers were supposed to watch out for "signs of radicalisation" so vague that they inevitably ended up relying "on their own stereotypes":

> In terms of Prevent, because of the two decades of the war on terror narrative, we live in a context where "terrorism" is singularly associated with Muslims in the public consciousness. Consequently, the ambiguity of Prevent's 'signs' makes people more, not less, likely to target Muslims (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 64-66).

These institutional policies have contributed to spreading unease and suffering in the British Muslim community. If Sivanandan wrote of a "metaphysics of fear" and

"siege mentality" (2006, 3, 4), Manzoor-Khan describes their effect as PTSD: "Islamophobia alters our physiologies through trauma, lives in our nervous systems, makes us hypervigilant and afraid" (2022, 7). She also mentions NGOs which specifically help individuals and their families to recover, such as HHUGS (42) and CAGE (104); these organisations have provided care for 2710 families involved in terrorism-related arrests, "of which 54% result in the detainee being released without charge", and numberless cases of freedom-restricting control orders (T. Ahsan 2020, n.p.).

The foundations of these discriminatory persecutions were probably laid even before 7/7, with the 2003 Extradition Act whereby "the UK would be expected to extradite any individual to the US on request", on the sole grounds of "reasonable suspicion". The Act was "fast-tracked into UK legislation without a formal consultative parliamentary process" (Kapoor 2013, 181) and involved no British tribunal. Predictably, a controversy ensued around this breach of national sovereignty which Nisha Kapoor (2013, 189) defined as "the legal equivalent of rendition", hence going against the international law on human rights (Peirce 2010, 185; in Kapoor 2013, 100). This Act affected a great number of Muslim British citizens and their families. Numerous cases of institutional racism were brought to light, too, such as Home Secretary Theresa May cancelling the extradition of Gary McKinnon, a white Briton and autistic person accused of cyber-related crimes (Kapoor 2013, 194-195), whereas the same thing did not happen to Syed Talha Ahsan – born in London in 1979 of Bengali parents, graduate at SOAS in Arabic Studies, autistic person, poet, and translator.

Accused of having supported Bosnian, Chechnyan, and Afghan fighters (before 9/11) under an online pseudonym, Talha Ahsan was held in UK prisons between 2006 and 2012, extradited to a maximum-security Connecticut penitentiary, tried, and released in 2014 after accepting a plea bargain (H. Ahsan 2020, n.p.). Talha Ahsan may be seen as an example of a large number of British Muslims who, in words of lawyer Gareth Peirce:

> accessed the Internet prompted by an interest – shared with millions of their contemporaries around the world, Muslim and non-Muslim – in the workings of political and radical Islam [… they were] not remotely involved in any terrorist activity (Peirce 2007, n.p.).

3. Talha Ahsan's Written and Video Poetry

Talha Ahsan was recipient of the Koestler Award for his poetry. In the light of his ordeal, the poems which are most likely to strike a reader's attention are those related to his story. One case in point is *Mind the Gap*:

> ( ) until proven ( ),
> ( ) and ( ),
> anti-( )
>
> some allegations
> the firmer denied
> the greater proven,
>
> the chasm between
> ( ) and ( ) widens,
>
> jump it,
> don't fill it
> (T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.).

This formal experiment carries ironical undertones, but it is certainly bitter irony hinting at the fact that the 2003 Extradition Act did not include "the need to provide *prima facie* evidence" (Kapoor 2013, 181). According to lawyer Fahad Ansari, who defended cases like Talha Ahsan's, "to not be shown or told of the evidence against you to be able to challenge it results in feelings of complete and utter

helplessness […] some equate the process with fighting ghosts" (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 53). Denying the allegations, therefore, cannot but lead to a Kafkaesque situation, as the second stanza suggests. The poem closes on an exhortation to "jump" the gap in order not to fall into the empty space below it; travellers on the London Underground (and some railway stations) are familiar with the exhortation to "mind the gap" between the train doorway and the station platform, regularly broadcast from loudspeakers.

Images of empty spaces, invisibilisation and disappearance return in *Life Sentence*:

> To kill
> is to erase an image
> off a mirror:
>
> swift glance &
> side step,
>
> no body
>
> just a gaping hole
> upon an indifferent world
> (T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.).

The lines convey a sense of abandonment easily relatable to the indifference of British society towards his plight, as the ending says. Once again, what dominates the scene is "a gaping hole": the swishing movement that creates it is phonetically reinforced by the alliteration on [s] in "swift", "side", and "step".

The titular poem of Talha Ahsan's collection, *This Be the Answer*, is directly connected to his imprisonment, affirming resilience in the face of humiliation:

A prisoner on his knees
scrubs around the toilet bowl
and the bristles of the brush
scuttles to and fro
as a guard swaggers over
to yell rather than ask –

Where is your God now? […]

He is with me now, gov.
My God is with me now
hearing and seeing,
whilst your superiors
when they see you, do not look at you
and when they hear you, do not listen to you […]

My God wants me to call Him
whilst your superiors demand you knock

And when I go towards Him a hand span,
He comes to me a yard
and when I go to Him walking,
He comes to me running
(T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.).

It seems that this kind of situation is rather common for British Muslims in prisons or in administrative detention. In British jails, “guards are more likely to restrain and segregate Muslim prisoners. Islam is routinely weaponized against them”, while in detention centres for migrants “[u]nhygienic conditions have also forced Muslims to pray next to open toilets – judged a human rights abuse by a High Court in 2018” (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 51, 126-127).

In the poem, the guard's bullying and the prisoner's answer are paralleled by the repetition-cum-variance of "gov" and "God". The prisoner's reply deconstructs the stereotypical equivalence (widespread even among progressive intellectuals) between Muslim faith and reduction of freedom; this affirmation of dignity is confirmed in the poem's ending: "a prisoner on his knees, / still, as if in prayer" (T. Ahsan 2011, n.p.). In this regard, Talha Ahsan's stance is close to Manzoor-Khan's: far from adopting a secular perspective, the latter acknowledges her religious faith as a means to fight against injustice and change the world – in opposition to British policies trying to impose a vision of Muslim faith as appropriate only for one's private dimension, lest it run the risk of radicalising: "when Muslims internalise these parameters, we submit to a reductive vision of Islam as merely a part of our private identity that stays at home away from 'politics', rather than an impetus to transform our world" (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 119). The poem's religious atmosphere may also be construed in the light of the intertextuality of its title – as if its "answer" were a response to the popular poem by Philip Larkin *This Be the Verse* (1971), often quoted as emblematic of the liberation of mores during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nevertheless, Talha Ahsan's poetic output is not limited to lines related to his ordeal, be they on issues of religion, ethnicity, Islamophobia, or war on terror. Some of his poems widen his preoccupations regarding otherness, as in the case of *On a Foreign Plain*:

> This voice within
> Silent I hear
> May not have an accent
> But is as foreign under my skin
> As an arrow.
>
> The grammar and syntax sound
> But the unidiomatic grates.

> Calligraphy to a blind man,
> Music to the deaf, I am […]
> (T. Ahsan unpublished, n.p.).

The wounding estrangement felt as a consequence of his neurodivergence culminates in the last two lines quoted above, which openly point to a condition of incomprehension described throughout the poem thanks to an extended linguistic metaphor.

This imagery recurs in his video-animated poem *I, Otherstani*. In its captioned prologue, the author states the double rejection that he was victim of: "stranger in the country of my birth yet mocked as quintessentially English by American correctional officers mimicking accents and catchphrases from English movie characters". The poem itself begins by depicting a fictional world scarred by a polarisation ("And so the world was divided into Hereistan and Thereistan") where violence runs amok and killings "feed into each other like a snake chasing its tail […] Infinity groans and falls to his side" and each murderer "grapples for the beginning of blame". Torn between these Manichean opposites, the poetical voice helplessly asks: "Where would I go? Where would I live? Is your country the one you will be born in or the one you died in?". The immediate answer is "I want to belong to the country of birds" (a hoopoe is the protagonist of the poem's animation) and triggers the wish for a homeland untainted by that spiral of violence: "So where's Otherstan?". As in *On a Foreign Plain*, the location of this desired home for otherness is related to language: "It is between the gaps of words; the hollows between syllables". Talha Ahsan thus envisions a sort of post-structuralist deconstruction of Manichean oppositions rooted in his personal experience, vindicating the rights and agency of otherness at large: as the conclusion of the poem says, "I remain truly an Otherstani" (T. Ahsan 2020, n.p.).

This defence of otherness was taken up by his artivist brother Hamja Ahsan, who developed it in surprising forms and genres, as the next section shows.

4. Hamja Ahsan's Artivist Writings

In a short documentary presenting his *Shy Radical* project, Hamja Ahsan describes the project as having been in his mind for a long time when he was struggling with depression related to his own withdrawn character; at the same time, he acknowledges that his brother Talha's imprisonment and writings acted as a sort of catalyst:

> I always daydreamed about this important book I would write, which would take revenge on the world, which would bring all of those grievances together […]. I feel like it's something that's always been in me. […] One morning in summer 2006 my life changed forever […]. Police officers took my brother away […]. They put him in Belmarsh Prison. Police officers on orders from the United States were made to go through every corner of my room – diaries, my mobile phone, my entire CD collection […]. I was forced into spotlight which was incredibly traumatic for an introvert person. I don't want any other British family to go through the nightmare we went through. […] In the seventh year of his detention without trial Talha, my brother, imagined a land called Otherstan […]. It was Talha's poetry, written from solitary confinement in a death-row prison, that inspired my own ideas for Aspergistan and the Shy Radical movement (H. Ahsan 2020, n.p.).

I first came across Hamja Ahsan's artivism in 2012, at an event organised by him and called *Extradite Me, I'm British*. That was actually my very first encounter with both Talha's and Hamja's works. I went to that evening of political speeches and stand-up comedy because of the curiosity triggered by the title – of course, it referred to Talha Ahsan's imprisonment and pending extradition to the US, against which his brother was organising awareness-raising events of this kind. Much later, Hamja Ahsan would curate an exhibition to celebrate the 10th anniversary of his brother's release: *My Brother Is Back – On Islamophobia, Extradition and Prisoner Solidarity* (London, 21st August-8th September 2024), collecting works and interventions by many artists and intellectuals; worthy of note is the

fact that its bill stated: “Closing events on personal resilience and community support, with letters and short stories that look at state cruelty from Theresa May to Keir Starmer”.

This section focuses on the volume *Shy Radicals: The Anti-Systemic Politics of the Introvert Militant* (2017), where Hamja Ahsan develops his own version of Talha Ahsan’s Otherstani. It is based on the fictional existence of the Shy People’s Republic of Aspergistan: about its genesis, the author declared “there wasn’t a collective identity or history that I could turn to, so I just made one up” (H. Ahsan 2020, n.p.). The most appropriate definition for this book, in my view, is offered by its Italian translator Piernicola D’Ortona, who calls it “un manifesto fantapolitico” (“a political fiction manifesto”, translation mine; D’Ortona 2019, 9).

The publication is connected to Hamja Ahsan’s project *The Aspergistan Referendum*, winner of the Grand Prize of the 33rd Ljubljana Biennal of Graphic Arts in 2019. Small and compact like a booklet, from its very physical shape *Shy Radicals* hints at fundamentalist Islam and at how we imagine its religious handbooks; chromatically, this suggestion is enhanced by some of its pages being black with white titles. The same parodic frame of reference is strengthened by puns such as “shy” (hinting at “Shia”) and “Shyria Law”. At the same time, the book conveys a message which represents a clear refusal of fundamentalism: “Shy Radicals reject the recent attempt by the Extrovert World Order […] to place it on a list of proscribed terrorist organizations” (H. Ahsan 2017, 51; hereafter, the book will be referred to as *SR* followed by page number). Furthermore, the “Introvert Movement” on which the worldview of Shy Radicals is based declares itself against both “Terrorism and Extrovert Supremacism”, which “exist on the same plane. Terrorism aspires to be the centre of attention. Attention is the central category of politics in Extrovert ideology [… they are both] powers of distractive mass-media populism” (*SR* 50).

In imagining this non-existent movement and country, *Shy Radicals* is constructed as a series of parodies of various textual genres, notably beginning with a long “Draft Constitution of the Shy People’s Republic of Aspergistan”. Just to

mention a few, Article 1 defines “an independent Pan-Shyist state representing the interests of all Shy, Introvert and Autistic Spectrum peoples, herein referred to as Aspergistan”; Article 16 “guarantees the right to silence”; Article 17 grants “freedom from Extrovert harassment during leisure time and national holidays […] from all Extrovert epistemic violence, including all accusations of being anti-social or aloof”; Article 19 “guarantees the absolute protection of quiet children against bullying, peer pressure and introvert hate crime” (*SR* 16-20).
Some of the constitutional articles trace a clear connection with urgent contemporary issues which directly impinge on introverts. According to Article 54,

> The Shyria Court System recognises that mindless environmental destruction […] accords with the culture of bragging and ostentatiousness, and that compulsive consumerism brings destruction and exhaustion of the world’s resources in the pursuit of insatiable decadent Extrovert extravagance (*SR* 30).

Article 61 takes sides with free movement and migrations:

> Asylum is guaranteed for all those engaged in struggle and resistance as part of the Pan-Shyist ideology. Safe passage from Extrovert-Supremacist states to Aspergistan will be provided for all those suffering political persecution (*SR* 32).

As I have said above, the rest of the book is composed of a collection of textual genres which all contribute to depicting the many facets of the Introvert Movement, such as an interview with jailed Shy Radical activist Amy Littlewood, who declares that “shyness is a political position” (*SR* 64) and accuses those who belong to the “Trendy Club system” of living “for their Friday night release, their complicity justifying the sheep-like zombie death they endure every other weekday” (*SR* 61); documents from the Shy Radical Students’ Movement (*SR* 69-78); film reviews from an Introvert critical perspective (*SR* 79-90); an Oral History Pro-

ject, where one testimony criticises the noisy aggressiveness of Westernised Islam: “I thought that Islam was the last remaining bulwark against the forces of Extrovert-Supremacism. I was wrong […]. Urban Islam came as a shock to my system” (*SR* 99); reports from Shy Radical delegations worldwide (*SR* 107-120); and a directory of helpful services with a donation page (*SR* 131-135, 164-165).

Overall, the originality of *Shy Radicals* rests on the ambivalent reactions that it is bound to produce in readers: some of its claims are especially convincing – when not fascinating – whereas others emerge as hard to accept, when not provocative. On one hand, why shouldn’t the rights of shy people (in the broad definition mentioned in Article 1) be respected? How could one not agree that the “Trendy Club cultivates man’s very worst traits: shallowness, vanity, arrogance, sexual chauvinism, ostentatiousness” (*SR* 61)? How could one not feel sympathy for the statements “Extrovert-Supremacists confuse their lifestyle with life itself; and our privileging of inner contemplation, slowness and depth of reflection with death. […]. We teach life. They teach zombification”?

On the other hand, *Shy Radicals* occasionally pushes its challenging stance so far as to present apparently negative contexts or structures as positive, or vice versa. Although I understand that reactions are perforce to some degree subjective, I think readers are likely to feel perplexed in the face of the Hikikomori movement #OCCUPYBEDROOM (“our silence and reclusiveness means that our message cannot be misused or instrumentalised”; *SR* 37); of campus feminists described as having monopolised the interpretation of Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar* but “they didn’t consider why it connected with us too as alienated men” (*SR* 102); of the description of North Korea as in tune with the principle of Shy Radicals and opposed to Trendy-club-dominated South Korea (*SR* 66); and of the book’s reflections on the wearing of Niqab as the

> right to anonymity in public space [… it is] assumed the women who wore the face veil were always submissive, subjugated and oppressed. But this is the way the Extrovert-Supremacist pig views us Shy peoples too (*SR* 129-130).

5. Conclusion: Margins and Dissent

> Our place was the very house of difference
> rather than the security of any particular difference
> (Lorde 1990, 224).
>
> attention to the wholly other must be constantly reviewed
> (Spivak 1990, 5).

This article focused on the Islamophobic persecutions and detentions carried out by British institutions against Muslim individuals and their families, taking Talha Ahsan's ordeal as emblematic of the phenomenon. With profound respect for the suffering involved for Talha Ahsan and his whole family, these pages have examined his and his brother Hamja's artistic responses in their branching out to touch upon marginalised groups at large, thus acquiring a wider and more complex resonance. Arguably, works like *I, Otherstani* and *Shy Radicals* are to be seen as pointing to two different but related aspects – one theoretical, the other political. As far as theory is concerned, their concepts are reminiscent of the importance placed on margins as such by some key postcolonial thinkers from the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as Gayatri Spivak, who stressed the "wholly otherness of margins" which are to be seen as ever elusive, never becoming central, demanding to be defended as the guardians of our critical spirit (Spivak 1990, 4). In *Shy Radicals*, this is especially clear in Article 8 of the Draft Constitution: "Mainstream life has no place in Aspergistan. All politics will remain underground" (*SR* 17). Relatedly, the primacy of the margins as such is evident in the works by some African American feminists, as in Audre Lorde's epigraph above. Much like Spivak, bell hooks, too, brings to the fore the critical potential of marginality, which "is also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance […]. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (hooks 1989, 20). As easily inferred, in this quote the closing

reference to the making of new spaces bears a stunning resemblance to what both Talha and Hamja Ahsan achieve in their art.

While abstracting concrete issues related to Islamophobia and war on terror, Talha's and Hamja Ahsan's conceptualisations on the value of otherness may also be taken as strictly connected to the impact of those policies on a socio-political level. Analysts have repeatedly brought to the fore how the war on terror helped to foster a repressive militarisation of British society, shaping a continuum which ranges from terrorists abroad to migrants and internal minorities, and exacerbating the living conditions of the most vulnerable subjects (Bigo 2006, 115-116). This "permanent state of exception" (135) led to the creation of new crimes of thought, speech, and solidarity, such as "provocation to commit terrorism", which all worked "in the direction of criminalising ideas" (Fekete 2009, 105). In this light, it is all forms of dissent that have been dangerously relegated to the margins:

> National security measures expand the state's powers to repress more broadly at its own discretion. So, although the apparatus has been built at the back of Islamophobia, it threatens even those who consent to it (Manzoor-Khan 2022, 46).

In the end, these two aspects – theoretical marginality and political dissent – are bound to be seen as related. This connection is traced clearly by Spivak, who aptly warns us (and herself) about the issue of intellectual positionality:

> if you forget the productive unease that what you do with the utmost care is judged by those margins, in the political field you get the pluralism of repressive tolerance and sanctioned ignorance, and varieties of fundamentalism, totalitarianism […] and in the field of writing about and teaching literature, you get both the benign or resentful conservatism of the establishment *and* the masquerade of the privileged as the disenfranchised, or their liberator (Spivak 1990, 4; her italics).

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