TANJIL RASHID

Another Voice

It was the 7 July bombings, not 9/11, that put Muslims at the centre of terror discourse

In a way, it had to be a train. AJP Taylor conceived of history unfolding as inexorably as a railway timetable, a train that advanced with clockwork certainty towards its terminus. In this point of view, the history of Islamist suicide terrorism was always going to have a scheduled stop in London, with its big Muslim diaspora and contested imperial past.

And so, 20 years ago, on 7 July 2005, at 8.49am, it finally arrived. When it did, it turned out to be not just a metaphorical train, signifying the advent in Britain of a certain ineluctable history, but three perilously real Underground carriages sharking through Zone 1 as they were detonated by suicide bombers. Across four bombings that day – there was also a bus whose upper deck was peeled off – 52 innocents were killed.

The terror train in London was strangely delayed. Four years had passed since the strike on the World Trade Center, at the heart of the American empire; the UK, too, would become enmeshed in the attack's aftermath, in Afghanistan and Iraq. In London, the period bookended by 9/11 and 7/7 was peaceful, untroubled, and my innocent early teens were trifled away in a city that, compared to now, was a Garden of Eden. Kids like me were no more conscious of being Muslim than Adam and Eve were of their sex. Some say 9/11 had already changed that, but while there were tense times in 2001, London's multicultural innocence wasn't really lost until the 2005 attacks.

Even after terror traumatised New York, the narratives that defined early-Noughties London were still Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, both about Bangladeshi Londoners like my family and broadly optimistic about our presence here. They were among the first contemporary books I read (overrated as literary fiction; near perfect as YA novels). But after 7/7, writers could no longer envision multicultural London in that way. It had become "Londonistan", an alleged seedbed of terror.

Islamophobia soared to the point that a name for it had to be popularised. Suspicion of Muslim immigration, hysteria about Muslim birth rates, the "Prevent" policy that pre-emptively viewed young Muslims as potential terrorists: so much that is still with us originated in 2005. The cultural mood began morphing as drastically as my pubescent mind and body.

I remember wishing away those changes, craving the innocence that possessed me before I was 14, when the bombs went off – an innocence both personal and political. The odour clouding my body was as unwelcome as the spectre of suicide bombings. In Baghdad, there were as many as a dozen a day; I read the news, I knew this related, somehow, to my doomed religion. I prayed that the train of history, and its concomitant trail of destruction, would not reach Britain. Couldn't it just shuttle between America and Afghanistan, but somehow swerve us, leaving us to frolic in our ahistorical Eden? If only British Muslims could be like Mauritian Muslims, say, or Guyanese Muslims, serenely insulated from these momentous episodes. If only we could sit history out.

> The bombers were "homegrown", a word that before 2005 denoted vegetables

The moment we learned of the bombings, my Muslim classmates and I began concocting our nervous conspiracy theories. It was the French, of course, enraged at losing out to us the day before on their bid to host the Olympics (we were British enough to recognise our true enemies). The bombers couldn't possibly have been Muslim, still less British! Alas, they were both. They were "homegrown", a word that before 2005 denoted vegetable produce, not terror threats.

I was no homegrown radish. Instead, I was a prospective homegrown terrorist: every British Muslim was, after 7/7 – even in the eyes of discerning writers. "The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order," Martin Amis mused a year after the attacks. "What sort of suffering? Not letting them travel. Deportation further down the road. Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children."

As one of those children, aged all of 16, I was scandalised. The scandal was less Islamophobia than the incoherence of liberalism. In *The Second Plane* – a now under-appreciated terror-themed work released a few years after 7/7 – Amis criticised Islam, in which, supposedly, "there is no individual; there is only the *ummah* – the community of believers". And yet here he was, a self-proclaimed believer in the individual, proposing collective punishment. The interview was disowned; a "thought experiment", Amis regretted, but one with a sinister prescience.

Reading the newspaper reviews in those years, I found relentless debates no longer about poetry or Proust, but suddenly about myself. This was one of the unintended effects of the train that brought Islamist suicide bombings to Britain: it transported the Muslim to the centre of cultural discourse. Every writer weighed in on the Muslim question. This was disquieting.

But, I now appreciate, it also created a point of contact, however abrasive, between myself and literary life. "If September 11 had to happen," Amis writes in the *The Second Plane*, "then I am not at all sorry that it happened in my lifetime." I could say the same of the feverish aftermath to 7/7. It made me a journalist. Without it, I would be a suburban GP somewhere. Instead, I'm here at this magazine, privileged to have Martin Amis's old job. ●

Tanjil Rashid will join the New Statesman as culture editor later this month

MARTA SIGNORI