

One London night, a few weeks after Brexit, something happened as I was walking to a bus stop that had never happened in the 9 years since I'd moved to the UK: a man (white, young, Londoner by his accent) shouted abuse at me and followed up with 'Go back where you came from'. He seemed more ridiculous than threatening but even so I wasn't about to get into any kind of exchange with him, so I didn't ask the question I wanted to ask: 'And where do you think that is?'

Austria and the Netherlands, where far-right parties have recently seen a surge in popularity. There are many reasons for this widespread lurch towards xenophobic nationalism — Pankaj Mishra's new book *The Age of Anger* is a particularly fascinating analysis of how modernity/neo-liberalism has failed a large percentage of the people who expected to have their lives improved by it — but despite all the common factors, the malaise plays out differently in every

nation. And living in Britain the last decade has meant watching the disease advance, bit by bit, and both seeing and not seeing where it could lead us. I can't say that I knew the Brexit vote would win — but in the weeks leading up to the referendum I thought the chances were 50/50. There's nothing like being a recent migrant to be attuned to shifting attitudes towards migrants in your new nation. When I entered the UK in 2007 it was on a 'writers, artists and composers' visa

allow the government a mechanism to make the rules even more stringent with relative ease. I was only able to stay on when my visa expired because that particular year I had earned enough from my writing to switch into another visa category. And within a couple of years the category I had switched to became impossible for someone with my income level to qualify for, and then it was erased entirely.

It was clear what was going on — first the Labour, then the Tory-Liberal government, was responding to the increased anti-migrant feeling (stoked by the right-wing press) by making it more difficult for non-EU citizens to migrate to the UK. In doing that, the parties accepted the cries of the far-right which said migration levels were too high and damaging the UK — migrants were taking jobs, committing crime, changing the cultural fabric of the UK.

Where there should have been a space

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After page 6 conversation on migrants — the Tories were the most enthusiastic about falling in line, but Labour really didn't do much better. Watching all of this, listening to all the campaign promises about reducing net migration, I often thought the politicians were painting themselves into a corner. They could make it near-impossible for non-EU migrants to enter the UK — going so far as linking to income levels the right to bring in a non-EU spouse to the UK, as though the well-off had a greater right than the poor to live with their spouses in their nation of citizenship — but since freedom of movement was enshrined in EU law there would come a point when the press, the politicians, and the electorate would simply have to face the reality of porous European borders. Perhaps then, I naively thought, the political parties would get round to talking about the benefits of being part of the EU rather than allowing 'the Poles are coming and they're taking our jobs' to be just about the only kind of rhetoric you ever heard about the EU. I thought, that is, that the migrant hysteria was a cry of defeat that preceded adjusting to a new reality.

And then David Cameron promised a referendum on Europe in order to placate his Euro-skeptic back-benchers,



After the referendum we woke up in a Britain where to suggest that an anti-EU vote had anything to do with racism meant you were part of a London elite.

# I, Migrant

KAMILA SHAMSIE

In London, I'm almost never recognised as Pakistani. Spain or Italy or Greece are the countries I'm more often asked if I'm from. And so I couldn't help wondering, as I walked away from the man, whether the racism I'd just had hurled at me was the old-fashioned 'Paki-bashing' that has so long been a part of UK life or if it were a more recent form of anti-European sentiment — that didn't confine itself only to Eastern Europeans as it used to. More likely, I decided, it was both. The man didn't know where exactly my origins lay, or even if I had ever lived anywhere other than the UK — but he knew I wasn't an Anglo-Saxon. And that was enough to make me the unwanted outsider. Welcome to Brexit Britain.

Brexit Britain isn't, of course, an island unto itself. Rising anti-migrant feeling is part of Trump's America and the many nations of Europe, such as France,



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Even so, I didn't understand how much the UK had changed until the day the anti-Brexit MP Jo Cox was shot dead. 'Stronger together' had been her passionate plea for a UK that embraces migrants; against that was the 'Britain First' cry of the man who killed her. The day she died, rather than the day Brexit was voted in, was when I realised how dark the world around me had become.

— one of the many visa routes that could lead towards settlement and citizenship. Within a year of my arrival a new 'points-based' visa system was introduced by the Labour government — ostensibly to streamline the work of the Home Office. But from the start, it seemed a way to make far fewer non-EU citizens eligible for settlement, and to

for reasoned conversation — which, for instance, stressed the contribution of migrants to the economy and to the cultural life of Britain while also looking at the costs of migration — there was instead a capitulation to hysteria.

And so, increasingly, we saw the far-right dictate the terms of the

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Brexit was re-configured as the triumph of the Overlooked, the democratic roar of the Ones Who Were Left Behind. Now the London liberal elite would be forced to hear the pain of the white working class. The key word there, of course, is 'white'. The black and Asian working class have been removed from the analysis entirely because their far more pro-migrant political stance complicates that line that this is about those on the margins standing up to those at the centre of power.



Banksy's graffiti.

never imagining — if all the pundits and Westminster insiders are to be believed — that such a vote could be lost. At first, it was simply so bizarre that my brain failed to really register what was at stake. But once it became clear that the Brexit vote would be, at heart, a vote on freedom of movement in the EU I began to have a very bad feeling.

Even so, I didn't understand how much the UK had changed until the day the anti-Brexit MP Jo Cox was shot dead. 'Stronger together' had been her passionate plea for a UK that embraces migrants; against that was the 'Britain First' cry of the man who killed her. The day she died, rather than the day Brexit was voted in, was when I realised how dark the world around me had become.

No more was it possible to think of the UK as a place where people could express unpopular views without the fear of being killed in the street for it. I watched news reports of Jo Cox's death and I thought of Salman Taseer, Shahbaz Bhatti, Parveen Rahman and my childhood friend, Sabeen Mahmud. 'This is how it starts' I remember thinking.

But politicians and pundits gathered round and declared that to link Jo Cox's death to the referendum would be 'playing politics' with a woman's death. She should have been the face of the 'Remain' campaign, she should have been the warning of the road we were walking on. Instead, she faded away from the conversation as though 'Stronger Together' vs 'Britain First' had no real relevance to the referendum. The bitterest part of the Brexit vote was learning that Jo Cox's constituency had voted to leave the EU. The only word for it was 'indecent'.

So Brexit won. And while it would be unfair and wrong to imply that everyone who voted for it did so for racist reasons, it is also true that when Brexit won the racists won.

But the morning after the referendum we woke up in a Britain where to suggest that an anti-EU vote had anything to do with racism meant you were part of a London elite.

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Left Behind. Now the London liberal elite would be forced to hear the pain of the white working class. The key word there, of course, is 'white'. The black and Asian working class have been removed from the analysis entirely because their far more pro-migrant political stance complicates that line that this is about those on the margins standing up to those at the centre of power.

Now, people who a few years ago were rightly derided as peddling racist notions about the danger of migrants are being called 'prescient'; rather than treating the lies and hysteria of the Brexit campaign and the assassination of Jo Cox as reason for standing up to the anti-migrant rhetoric, the pundits and politicians are telling us we must listen to the 'genuine grievances' of alienated Britons.

Here's the funny thing though. Research has shown — repeatedly — that the highest anti-migrant feeling exists in parts of Britain where there are the lowest rates of migration. It's the idea of The Migrant that people hate and fear more than the reality of it. If there is any

hope, it's in that. And that's why, through all of this, and despite the isolated incident of the ridiculous young man telling me to go home, I've never felt happier to be in London, with its Muslim mayor, its pro-EU sentiment, its ability to know how people should live together. This is not an elite bubble; it's what hope looks like.

I've been thinking a lot in the months since Brexit of a greengrocer I was talking to in Brent, which is London's most racially-mixed borough. He grew up in a mostly white neighborhood; now his neighbors are Pakistani, Indian, Albanian, Caribbean. When I asked him about changing demographics he said, "There are really only two kinds of people from my point of view. Those who eat fresh produce and those who don't. And if they do, I find out what kind of vegetables they need for their kitchen, and then I stock them, and they buy them." That simple.

Kamila Shamsie is a celebrated novelist. She tweets @KamilaShamsie

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British Anti-Brexit MP Jo Cox Was shot and stabbed in Bristol, in the street outside her constituency.

PHOTO: AFP