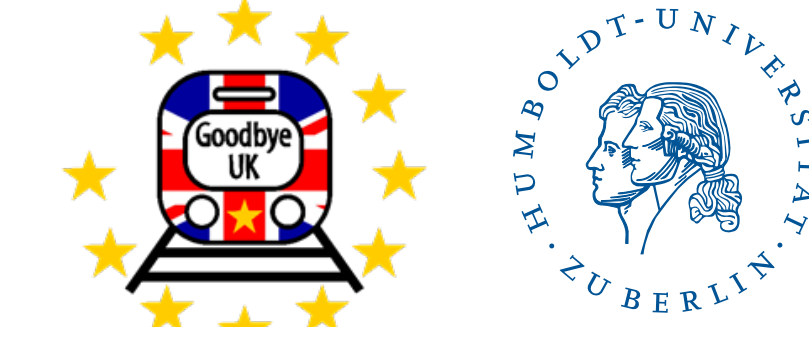


Multicultural London – convivial or divided? A literary exploration

by Franziska Freytag



1. *NW* by Zadie Smith (2012)

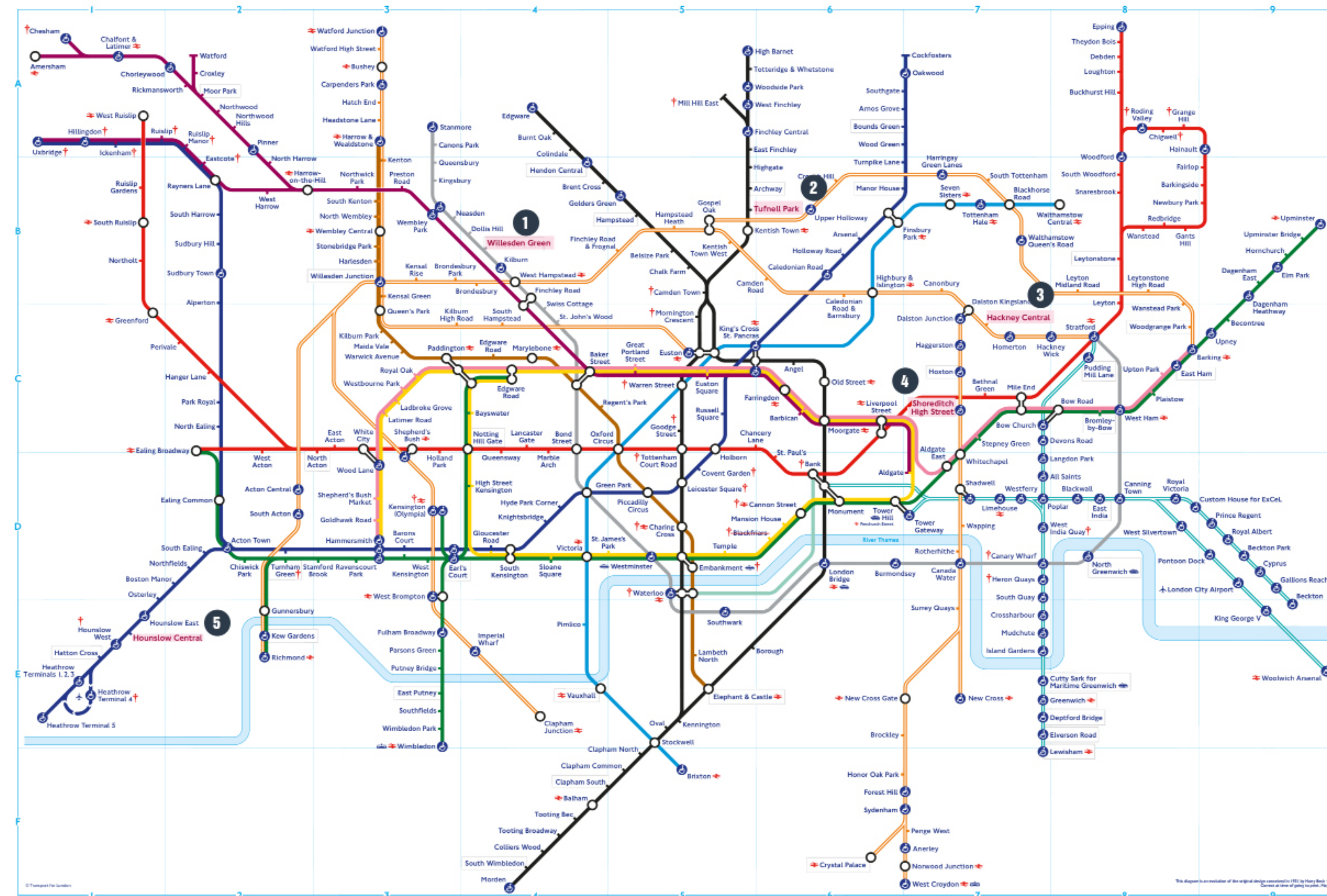
The novel takes us to Willesden in the north-west of London, the neighbourhood in which Leah, Felix and Natalie grew up and where Leah still lives. It is narrated from each of these three different points of views, giving the reader insights into their different lives. Leah Hanwell is of Irish descent and works in an environment where she is largely surrounded by co-workers of African-Caribbean origin. Perhaps not at first sight but nevertheless noticeable, Leah's ethnic background and the English culture in which she grew up result in two differing ethnic identities. Also the people around her have to deal with clashing cultural identities, as for instance her husband is half Algerian half Guadeloupean, her best friend Natalie is Caribbean and the husband of Natalie has Italian and Trinidadian roots. Compared to Leah, Natalie has clearly climbed the ladder to economic success, working as a barrister and being married to a rich man. So, whilst the novel discusses the theme of ethnic identity, it also critically engages with equality and opportunity, trying to abandon the stereotype of people with African-Caribbean descent as uneducated and unwilling to leave their community. Smith's novel portrays ethnicity as a very complex concept which is emphasised through different view points and differing ethnic backgrounds.

5. *Londonstani* by Gautam Malkani (2006)

The narrative follows a group of second generation Sikh and Hindu youngsters who deal with stolen mobile phones and try to identify themselves between two different cultures. It is quickly revealed that the boys fabricate a highly idealised version of what they consider their ethnic belonging, despising the English culture and even more so people who have integrated into it so much that no trace of their ethnic origin remains. The image drawn of the young Asian boys is devious, violent and dismissive of the effort to integrate into the society around them. Whilst referring to themselves as “desis”, they call white boys “goras” and brown people behaving like white ones “coconuts”. Nevertheless, the characters represent a variety of cultural references with the main character being a prime example of how constructed a cultural identity can be. The events of the boys' lives are depicted through an imaginative mix of English, Urdu, Punjabi, gangster rap and mobile-phone texting, making the reader aware of the major role language plays in the novel and for identifying oneself. Whilst illustrating the struggle between living one's culture within a culturally different environment, Gautam Malkani also seeks to explore these insecurities in relation to the matter of growing up and the importance masculinity plays for teenage boys. It is a story which picks up on myths about masculinity as well as South Asian immigrants in the UK.

2. *The Clothes on their Backs* by Linda Grant (2008)

Vivian Kovaks comes from a family of Jewish-Hungarian immigrants who came to England in 1938, seeking shelter. The novel takes us back to Vivian's early days in London in Baron's Court – a red brick building north of Marylebone Road – where she spent most of her childhood. Even though she has moved out of the area into a different district of London, she returns as an adult to her parents' house after her husband died days into their marriage. The story about her past and present intertwine through the appearance of Vivian's suspicious uncle who seems to belong to the family only by blood and questions her secretive parents who appear to hide more than they relinquish. On the one hand, “The Clothes on their Backs” discusses the subject of identity and how it is difficult to find one's own sometimes, especially when large parts of one's past have been hidden or connect to an ethnic background one can not relate to. In that respect, it also suggests that the clothes we wear can as much reveal our identity as they can hide or even change it. On the other hand, the novel depicts Hungary during the war through the stories told by Vivian's uncle and also what it meant for Jewish emigrants to flee to England in order to start a new life there.



3. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by Xiaolu Guo (2007)

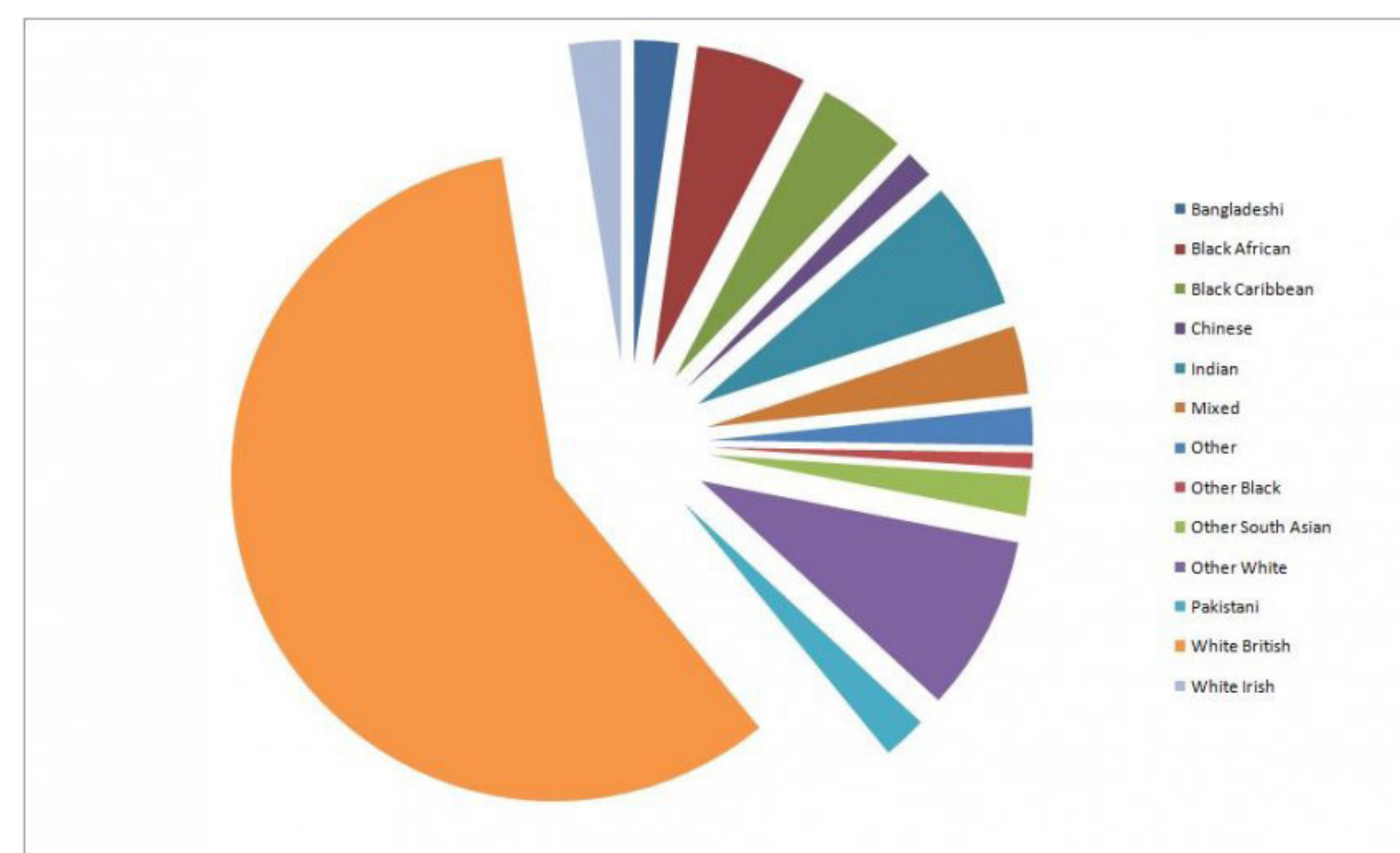
The 20-year-old Z, as she calls herself, moves from China to London for a year to learn the English language. Coming from a rural area, she feels rather alienated by city life in London as well as Western culture. At the centre of the narration lies Z's perspective on life in England as well as the love story between her and her English boyfriend, a 44 year-old bisexual vegetarian. It is a very unusual relationship which struggles greatly with communicative problems as well as cultural differences. The book is written in Asian infused English, emphasising the interconnectedness of language and identity. Whilst the protagonist's English improves over the course of the story, she keeps experiencing difficulties not only in adapting to the English lifestyle but also in understanding it, as the cultural context appears very different from her Chinese background. “A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers” explores the differences between two languages and how they shape one's thinking as well as communication and in that respect also how communication between two people can be complicated by speaking different languages. It furthermore illustrates in which ways cultures can differ and that language is a vital part of a cultural as well as an individual's identity in general.

4. *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (2003)

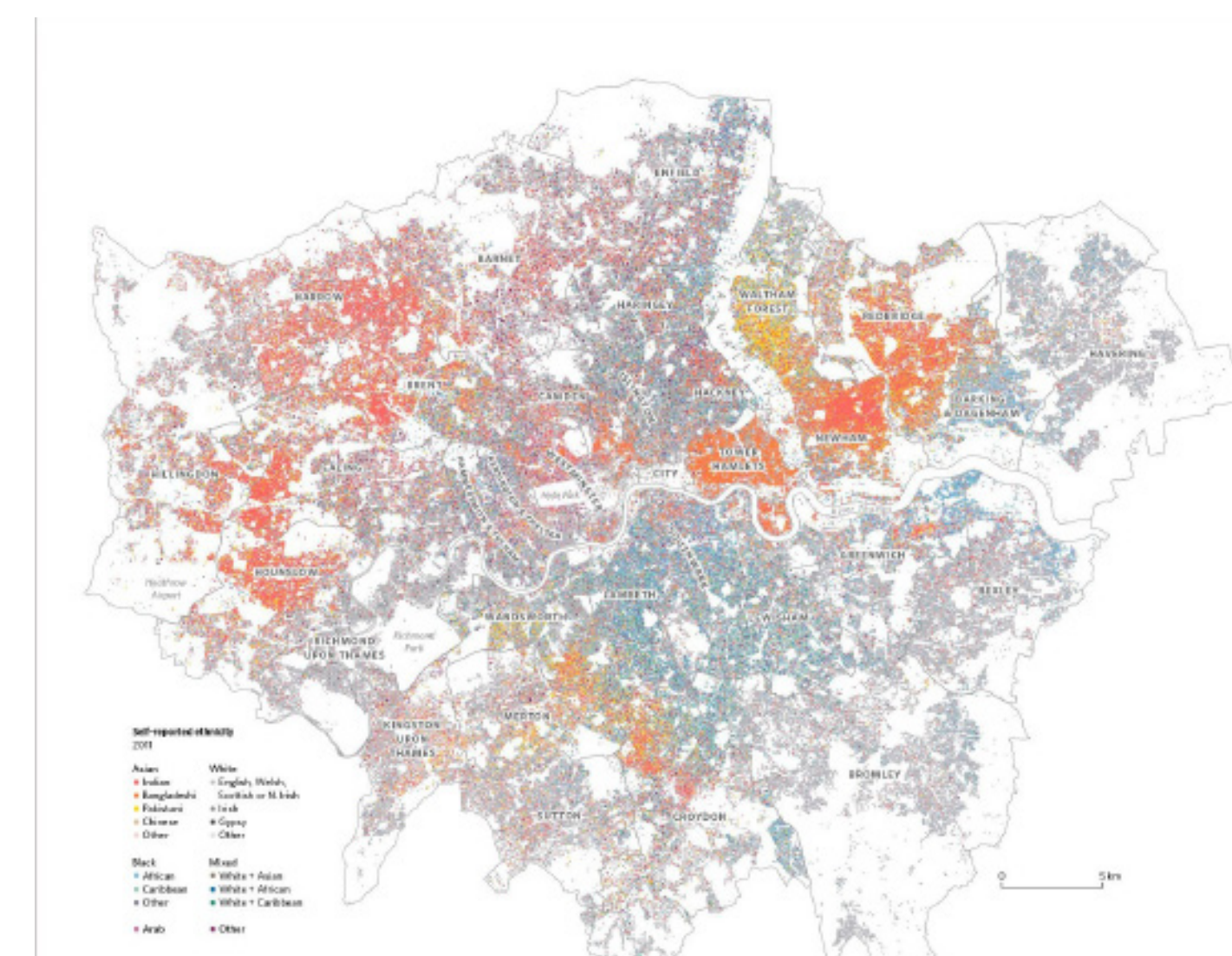
Monica Ali's first novel revolves around the protagonist Nazneen who is a Bangladeshi immigrant, coming to London at the age of 18 in order to be married to the 40-year-old Chanu. Whilst noticing the huge cultural differences between her home country and England, Nazneen is not given a chance to participate in this new society she finds herself in as her husband favours her to stay at home. Through many chapters the reader follows her desolate and empty life until Karim – a Bangladeshi from London – comes along and inspires her to take more action. Apart from Nazneen not really having the opportunity to integrate, the novel depicts many of the immigrants surrounding her as very different from English people and outlines how many do not even want to integrate into the English culture. It openly depicts the struggle between the two cultures and that there is often little tolerance from white English citizens. But also clashes between the first generation immigrants and the second generation (often within one family) are explored since the parents most often hold on to values and traditions concerning their ethnic background whilst their children grow up in the new environment that their parents came to live in. Even though Ali picks up on some stereotypes concerning Bangladeshi immigrants, she sketches her characters as very unique individuals who are, despite their shared background, very different from each other with differing dreams and aspirations for their lives.

Multiculturalism in London

The city of London is known as a multicultural hub which has one of the most ethnically diverse populations worldwide today (Perfect 4). In 2011, it was estimated that 37% of London's population was born abroad and less than 60% of the people living there are white (Perfect 4). London also seems to be the prime destination of initial settlement for the greatest proportion of immigrants coming to the UK and remains “the location where minority ethnic groups [are] most clustered” (Jivraj and Simpson 22). This is emphasised by statistics revealing that migration to London increases continuously with twice as many migrants having arrived in the city between 2001 and 2011 than between 1991 and 2001 (Perfect 4). However, it has been argued that the diversity in ethnic backgrounds of London's population does not automatically account for a multicultural society particularly when defining multiculturalism as “the creative interplay of [...] the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and the internal plurality of each culture” (Park qtd. in Perfect 5). London's multiculturalism is continuously discussed through literature, often praising its ethnically diverse nature but also criticising the concept of a multicultural society in the city and especially its implementation, as has been shown by the introduction of the novels above. Also and particularly in politics, the topic has become highly discussed with many different opinions being expressed. The former prime minister David Cameron for instance has criticised multiculturalism in his speech about radicalisation and terrorism in 2011, declaring that multiculturalism has failed in the UK. He pointed out that Britain had encouraged different cultures to live separate lives and spoke of segregated communities which do not actively take part in British society. In order to create more unity among the population, Cameron suggested pursuing a stronger national identity by promoting values such as freedom of speech, freedom of worship and democracy as well as equal rights for instance (Heath and Demireva 161). Seeking for stronger cohesion among the British citizens with these proposals, he also implied that everyone has to share the same values in order to belong to British society, leaving less space for ethnic heterogeneity. In contrast to Cameron, the British professor and writer Paul Gilroy sees the segregation of different ethnic communities as less problematic and views multiculturalism as a reality in Britain instead of an aspiration. Instead of thinking that Britain has failed at multiculturalism, he believes that it has developed its own version of it. Gilroy suggests that ethnic relations and its acceptance are going forward as well as backwards, concerning which population one looks at, as for instance many young, urban people tend to show more tolerance towards different ethnic groups whilst elderly, more traditional people tend to be more concerned about issues such as asylum seekers and crime as well as terrorism linked to non-British people. It is through this lack of tolerance by many Britons that Gilroy defines at least partly the reason for the rejection of multiculturalism and the view by many scholars and politicians such as Cameron that it does not seem to work (Beckett).



A pie chart showing the ethnic composition of London in 2006. (Source: Ladepeche)



A map of London showing the distribution of ethnic communities in different areas. (Source: BBC)