Introduction: Fairness and Belonging in Contemporary England

I began 12 months of residential fieldwork in a place I will call Halleigh, North Manchester, England, on 1 June 2006. It was around the time when the football World Cup was beginning. There were streamers and Union flags covering the city centre of Manchester. Little flags, linked up, were tied to lamp posts and strewn across the suburban streets of Halleigh. On looking up, one would see grey sky behind flags flapping in the wind. While the football matches were on, the streets were relatively empty of people. They were in local pubs and social clubs watching the matches, at work wishing they could be watching the football or in their homes, yes, watching the football. I walked along the streets of Halleigh, taking pictures of the flags hanging from bedroom windows, missing my husband and my home terribly, but eager to begin the long task before me.

I walked to a bus stop on the main road cutting through the centre of town and took a bus to nearby Rowbottom, a place that I would soon learn is referred to by many people in Halleigh and surrounding areas as ‘Little Pakistan’. I walked around the markets there and took pictures of the saris and the colourful fabrics. I bought a bag of cherries from a shop which sold brightly coloured fruit and vegetables stacked on top of tables, and all the spices, herbs and seasonings I could imagine. There were copies of the Koran hung on the walls of shops and most of the shopkeepers did not speak English. Somehow I managed to communicate, with an exchange of smiles and saying ‘thank you’ when someone offered to take a picture of me in front of a display of luminous fabrics. I felt for a moment as if I were in another place, somewhere far away from England. However, I walked through Rowbottom with the knowledge in the back of my mind that Halleigh was just a five-minute bus ride away.

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When I arrived back in Halleigh, back to the red-brick council houses and Union flags, I went into Starlings, where the doors were left open to let the cool air from outside into the club. I watched people as they watched the football match: England versus Trinidad and Tobago. Emotions were running high: men and women were shouting for the England team to score, hugging the person next to them, buying rounds and sharing cigarettes. There was laughter as people jumped up from their seats in intense excitement as the football on the wide screen reached ever closer to the goal net. Faces were painted red and white and most people sported their football shirts, demonstrating their support for the England team. I took more pictures and captured a video on my camera of the fans in this social club singing ‘God Save the Queen’ as they swayed to and fro, with their arms tightly holding the people next to them.

Celebrations of the World Cup were evident everywhere. St George’s flags were being displayed from Rochdale to the centre of Manchester. Men and women had their faces painted red and white. St George’s flags sat proudly atop the heads of England team supporters. Pubs and clubs made significantly more income from selling alcohol. Smart entrepreneurs claimed the right to sell flashing lights on necklaces and whistles to blow when the England team scored – and they had better score. The celebrations lasted for as long as England was in the game. They lessened when the England team lost to Portugal, in a match deemed to be extremely ‘unfair’, but the flags remained on display for some time after.

During the first week of the World Cup, Manchester Refugee Week was being celebrated in various parts of the city. These celebrations were significantly different. The leaflets advertising the event – some of which I found in a small stack on the main desk in the local library, some in the local housing offices in Rowbottom – read ‘Celebrating Manchester’s Cultural Diversity’. I searched the text to see whether there was an explanation as to why ‘Refugee’ had been chosen rather than any other term that might be viewed from a ‘white, English’ perspective as the ‘cultural other’. Populations of Asian immigrants, South Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, first, second and third generations of Bangladeshis, and growing numbers of Eastern Europeans were all referenced under the banner of ‘Refugees’. An offhand observation may be that each group and individual represented in Manchester Refugee Week has ‘moved into’ an already defined space, involving a history of oppression and domination, when arriving in the city. I soon learned in the course of fieldwork that there is also a potential perception that the ‘people of