Here to stay, here to fight! It is the slogan that decorates the front pages of the Kala Tora (Black Star), magazine of the Asian Youth Movement. Its writings imbue a characteristic militancy and syncratic identity, fomented by the experiences and language of the progeny of the first émigrés from the subcontinent. Anandi Ramamurthy’s book weaves a rich tapestry charting the chronology of the organised, radical, grassroots South-Asian movements in Britain that fought against systematic white supremacy, a history that has been all but extinguished from popular discourse. Based on testimonies from those involved in the movement’s beating heart, Ramamurthy’s book is comprehensive and precise. Shocked and awed by the British imperial exercise in the subcontinent, many South Asians were galvanised and optimistic for a brighter future when emigrating to the country of their former masters. They were greeted with deprivation and white supremacy both from above and below. The inception of the Asian Youth Movements and its subsequent scions rode on this toxic wave. Orientalist tropes of South Asian workers racialised the division of labour, often resulting in white workers collaborating with management over disputes brought by them. Similar sentiments seeped into schools with white parents campaigning for the removal of black kids, accompanied by segregated classes and a racist syllabus. With racist attacks and murders, it meant the birth of a movement was imminent.

The Asian Youth Movements (AYM), as the book narrates, were black power organisations, believing in the principles of self-defence and direct action against fascism of the State and on the street. The author discusses its self-determined complexion, working class, intelligent, organised and, most importantly, revolving around the experiences of those uniquely placed; the daughters and sons of immigrants but with their roots firmly planted here. Bradford, Leicester, Manchester, London and beyond all began to organise along these lines. The book illustrates how the AYM focussed much of their attention on campaigns against immigration laws and on confronting white supremacy on the street. The Anwar Ditta campaign, a Pakistani woman who fought to reunify her family following attempts by the State to keep them separate, garnered national support for the AYM. The Bradford 12 Campaign, a national movement that successfully defended Asian boys who had made petrol bombs to protect their communities after a series of racist attacks had swept the country, was testament to the AYM’s strength.

Ramamurthy articulates in detail these important events and identifies the significance of each in the personal and collective sense, allowing the reader to appreciate how this was not just a politics of anti-racism but one of self-empowerment. The Asian Youth Movements also sought to provide educative services, cultural events that celebrated the music, poetry and prose of the region without hyperbolising. It asks the bigger questions of religious and secular politics. It worked with other groups, similarly aligned in black communities, emulating in many ways the form and practice of the Black Panther Party. Their unique identity paved the way for linking their experiences as children of imperialism to struggles elsewhere, from Ireland to Palestine.

This book, however, is not apologetic. It does not romanticise or hyperbolise. It asks the bigger questions of religious and secular identity and where that leaves such a movement today. Ramamurthy talks frankly about its splinters, the influence of the Indian Workers Movement and later, the co-option of the organisation and its comrades by the State. The author highlights the significant analysis of race and class, identifying the imperative role of South Asians in the labour and anti-racist movement. There is something for everyone in this book; whether to prompt activists to critically look at their own work or others to situate their struggles as descending from a relatable history that many never thought existed. One is left with a sense of frustration but also hope that a similar, more perpetual resurgence of this energy can once again flourish. South Asians were not only active in this country’s labour and anti-fascist history, they were an integral part of it. This book remembers and continues that legacy.

Tanzil Chowdhury

The sensationalist journalism that surrounded the reports of the ‘white widow’ and her alleged role in the September 2013 attacks on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi is a timely reminder of the crude and simplistic way that the lives of individuals connected to terrorism are usually described by the media. Victoria Brittain’s powerful book is a timely counterpoint to this inflammatory language which characterises most reporting on this subject.

Shadow Lives is a meticulously researched account of the lives of women and families affected by the implementation of anti-terrorism measures. Victoria Brittain describes the lives of the ‘devastated individual families who have been invisible here mostly in Britain, dehumanised, expendable, in cruel experiments of social control which have left some dead, others mentally or physically broken.’

The book opens with an account of the historical and political forces which have shaped radical Islam and focuses on the subsequent suspension of many established principles of the rule of law following the attack on 9/11 which led to Guantánamo Bay and Control Orders in the UK.

Britain has interviewed and befriended over long periods of time a number of different women. She describes in detail the stories of Sabah, the wife of Jamil El Banna, who disappeared in Guantánamo Bay following a business trip to Gambia in 2002, and also of Zinnira, the wife of Shaker Aamer the last British resident to remain in Guantánamo Bay.

Imprisonment in Guantánamo and domestic Control Orders are open ended forms of imprisonment or restriction on individuals who have not faced trial and have had limited opportunity to challenge the basis of their detention.

Britain goes on to describe the ‘shadow lives’ led by the wives of individuals subject to Control Orders and the ongoing practical and emotional difficulties in their lives. The emotional rollercoaster of legal proceedings where hope can be repeatedly raised only to be dashed is described from the perspective of the families. The individual voices of these women and their personalities shines through in Brittain’s writing, as does their strength in adversity and their religious faith.

All of the women speak of their shock of being excluded from the normal operation of constitutional rights and the rule of law. Britain concludes that the events of 9/11 should have been used to strengthen our constitutional beliefs and the rule of law, and instead the so-called ‘war on terror’ has undermined the very values it purported to protect.

Margaret Gordon