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# Britain's rising immigrant stars: From Xiaolu Guo to Noma Dumezweni

They came to these shores to flee civil war, to escape censorship, to launch a fashion label, to advance scientific research... but while these immigrants to the UK are as diverse as their stories, one thing they share is that each will be making a big impact in 2016

[Holly Williams](#), [Susie Measure](#) | [@Holly\\_bops](#) | Sunday 3 January 2016 | [1 comment](#)



Novelist and film-maker Xiaolu Guo came to London on a scholarship to the UK's national film school and has settled in east London with her partner and child *Anna Huix*

## **The novelist and film-maker: Xiaolu Guo**

*Born: China, 1973*

*Arrived in the UK: 2002*

“I went to the Beijing Film Academy to study cinema and literature in the early 1990s, and stayed in Beijing for 10 years. I published 10 books – but before I left, I was censored by the state.

“I came to London on a scholarship to the UK's national film school. I left China without knowing a word of English, and suddenly realised I'd lost my entire identity – not only as someone from China, but also as a writer. I decided I would use just my broken English to write, so that was the beginning – again! – of my career. I work as a novelist now in my second language, English, and make films. She, a Chinese is a feature film I made [in 2009] about someone coming to London and trying to discover themselves.

“The first five years were extremely tough for me, because of financial difficulties. The cultural contrast was quite brutal. Chinese [people] can be really poor, but you have huge space to roam around; here, you're really poor and you have no space.

“I left London for artist residencies in Berlin, Hamburg and Paris. But for the past three years I've settled in east London with my partner and child. I feel as though I belong to Europe; that's my cultural identity now. But of course you are forever [seen as] a foreigner, especially if you're from the Far East. It's tough.

“Then I got this honour of being named one of Granta's Best Young British Novelists [in 2013], and I thought, ‘What? I'm British?’ This official hat landed on me. It was kind of funny. “I've just been contracted to publish a memoir – it's my journey as a

nomad, traveller, immigrant, from the East to the West, the communist country to the capitalist country; it's personal, and political."

*Guo's most recent novel, 'I Am China', is published by Chatto & Windus, priced £14.99*

## Britain's rising immigrant stars



show all

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### **The sportsman: Al Bangura**

*Born: Sierra Leone, 1988*

*Arrived in the UK: 2003*

"I was raised in Freetown until the age of 14, when I had a problem: my dad was the head of a secret voodoo society, and

some people from the village wanted me to take his place. But my life was playing football.

“I travelled to Guinea and met a French guy who promised to bring me to England to play. I didn’t know his intention was for me to be a male prostitute.

“In London, we went to a massive building and I was left alone. Then I saw three guys coming in; one tried to rape me. I was shaking, shouting. I couldn’t even speak English, I spoke Creole. They knew it would be trouble for them, so they let me make my way out. I was lucky, I met this Nigerian guy who put me on a bus to the Home Office. They wanted to send me back, but couldn’t because of my age. I got to stay until I was 18.

“I had a friend at Chertsey Town Football Club, and the club’s manager was chief scout for Watford FC. He organised a trial with Watford and they gave me a contract. I started getting paid. I was put with a family. Everything had changed in 10 months. I’m so grateful for what Watford did for me. I’ll always have it in my heart.

“Now, I talk to my mum and my sisters in Sierra Leone, which is good for me, and I have my two kids and my wife, who are always there for me. This year, I’m helping Sport for Freedom and the Premier League raise awareness to stop child trafficking.”

### **The comedian: Sajeela Kershi**

*Born: Pakistan*

*Arrived in the UK: 1977*



Comedian Sajeela Kershi tells her own stories about being a Muslim immigrant (Anna Huix)

“There are many reasons for immigration; my family’s reason was my mother’s jealousy. My father moved from Pakistan to Germany for work, and my mother saw a picture of him with another woman, and took us all over. There was nothing going on!

“She was ambitious for me and my sister – she wanted us to go to Oxford – so we moved from Germany to Surrey. I remember arriving at Christmas; with all the twinkling lights, it was magical.

“You don’t think of yourself as different when you’re growing up; you just want to fit in.

“I’d always loved performing – I even remember being the drunken innkeeper in a nativity as a child and realising I could make people laugh – so I did a comedy course as an adult.

“I started doing my show Immigrant Diaries three years ago; I tell my own stories about being a Muslim immigrant, and there

are lots of jokes, but I also invite guests who aren't comedians – presenters, actors, journalists – to tell a story about their experiences as immigrants. Because they're true stories, you can feel the room opening up.

“It wasn't intentional, but both *Immigrant Diaries* and my stand-up show, *Shallow Halal* – in which I talk about my agnostic position on the Muslim faith – have ended up being about the biggest issues of the moment. *Shallow Halal* is produced by Jamjar: Jews and Muslims Joined Against Racism.

“This year, I'm planning to introduce refugee stories to *Immigrant Diaries*; I'm working with organisations such as Migrant Voice on that. We tend to ignore statistics – we need to hear stories to recognise the humans. I'm also taking it to schools; if stories can connect adults, they can help kids.”

*'Immigrant Diaries' and 'Shallow Halal' are at the Leicester Square Theatre, London WC2, on 22 and 23 January respectively*

### **The campaigner: Meltem Avcil**

*Born: south-eastern Turkey, 1993*

*Arrived in the UK: 2001*



Campaigner Meltem Avcil says: 'I want Yarl's Wood closed. These people are not criminals' (Anna Huix)

“We came in 2001 because we are Kurds and there were no opportunities for us [elsewhere]. We were rejected for asylum in Germany and couldn't afford to go back to Turkey – we were poor – so we came here to try our luck.

“I remember sitting for hours, sleepless, no food, waiting for my mother to be interviewed for her asylum claim. Our assessment

took six years. We lived in temporary housing everywhere – Bradford, Doncaster, Newcastle.

“One morning, at 6am, eight immigration officers knocked on our door. I was 13. We were taken to Yarl’s Wood detention centre. We stayed for three months, though it was illegal to detain a child for more than 28 days.

“We were going to be deported on 15 November 2007. At 3am, they took me and my mum. We were handcuffed at the airport. [When] the plane started to move, I stood up and told everyone what was going on. Then the pilot came. He was very angry. He said, ‘Take these people off the plane.’

“We were taken to a hospital and I called the Children’s Commissioner, Sir Aynsley- Green. He came to visit me and looked very sad. The next day, we were released as if nothing had happened. My education was very disturbed, as we were relocated 14 or 15 times. Now I’m at Goldsmiths, studying psychology.

“I want Yarl’s Wood closed. These people are not criminals; they can live in society. Last year, I won the Cosmopolitan Ultimate Campaigner award. I’m running a petition online [at [change.org](http://change.org)]; 100,000 people have signed it.”

### **The fashion designer: Marta Marques**

*Born: Portugal, 1986*

*Arrived in the UK: 2009*



Fashion designer Marta Marques has launched her own womenswear label with her partner Paulo Almeida (Anna Huix)

“I met Paulo [Almeida, Marques’s partner in the womenswear label Marques’Almeida] at fashion college in Porto when we were 17 and 18. After we graduated, we both did some work experience in London – he was at Preen and I was at Vivienne Westwood. There were a lot of people doing work experience from different countries.

“We both went to Central St Martins to do a fashion MA [in 2009], but we didn’t start collaborating until our final projects. We are partners, too – we’ve been together since we started college in Portugal. It is intense working with your partner, but we don’t know anything else.

“There isn’t really a fashion industry in Portugal. Paris seemed a little bit old-fashioned; we came to London as it was very open. And we found there was a huge amount of support here for young designers – we didn’t expect to launch our label straight after graduating [in 2011], but lots of people were very encouraging.

“The brand began with denim, but it’s evolving. It’s a different take on designer clothing, where luxury can be quite raw.”

“Winning the LVMH award this year has really helped [the Louis Vuitton-sponsored prize awards €300,000 to a young designer]. Our team has increased from four to 12, and we can do bigger collections this year; we’re also launching our own website, which will be a new take on e-commerce.

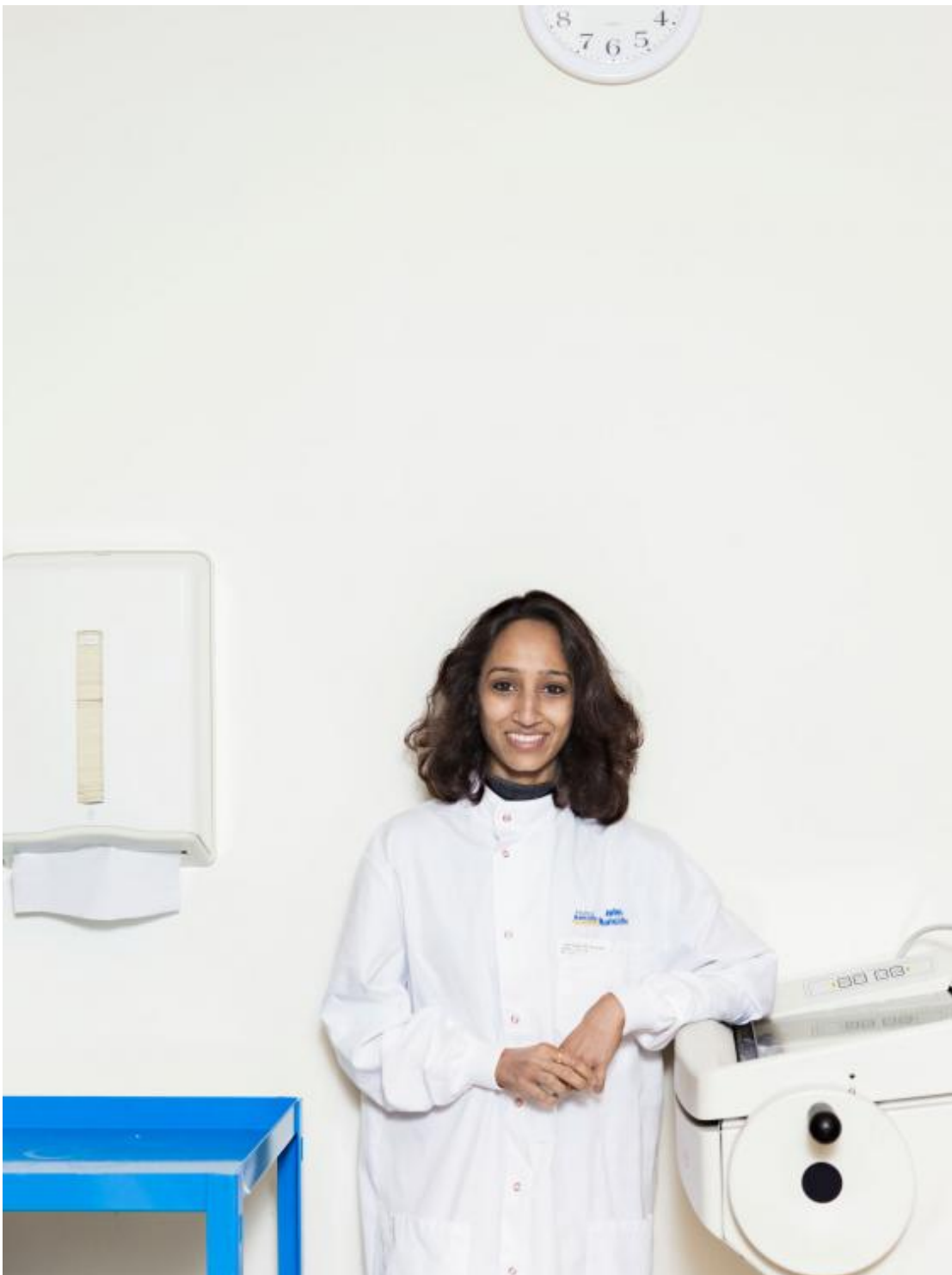
“We’re based in east London. There are lots of British fashion designers who are from other countries, and most of our friends, particularly when we first moved here, weren’t from the UK either. It’s never been a problem.”

For more: [marquesalmeida.com](http://marquesalmeida.com)

## **The scientist: Aarti Jagannath**

*Born: India, 1981*

*Arrived in the UK: 2005*



Scientist Aarti Jagannath won a scholarship from the British Council to study in Britain (Anna Huix)

“I won a scholarship from the British Council to study in Britain. I wanted to come to the University of Oxford to do research in biology. I did a master’s, then got more scholarship funding to do a PhD. [Jagannath is now a science lecturer at Oriel College.] I’d never come here before, but I did go to a school in Chennai where the teachers were British.

“Science is an area where there is little bias against gender, race or colour. And I think Oxford, and the UK in general, reflect that.

“Last year, I received a L’Oréal-Unesco fellowship for my research into circadian rhythm, or body clocks. It’s an incredibly stimulating environment in which to do research, which is why I came to the UK. The fun is in the research and the intellectual stimulation.

“I’m interested in how the body clock senses time. Our body looks to the sun for when to go to bed, when to eat, but we’ve distorted that. We live indoors; we have the light on and off.

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“I’m looking at when things go wrong, the consequences – studies of shift workers show they have a hugely increased risk of depression and diabetes – and what we can do to correct it, including making drugs.

“My husband is here as well. I met him as an undergraduate in Chennai and we both came to Oxford at the same time. He is also a scientist at the university.

“I found Britain very welcoming and oddly familiar in many respects. The only ‘work’ I had to do in order to fit in was to go to the pub and pick up the British sense of humour – not the hardest task!”

### **The food entrepreneur: Edin Basic**

*Born: Bosnia, 1966*

*Arrived in the UK: 1992*

Food entrepreneur Edin Basic started Firezza in 2001 with a friend from Mostar (Anna Huix)

“I was born in Sarajevo, but grew up in Mostar, which are both famous for the wrong reasons. I was studying civil engineering in May 1992 when the war arrived. I left with my girlfriend. We drove to Zagreb and asked a travel agent for two tickets somewhere. The next day we arrived in London. I didn’t speak English. We came as refugees and had to be on benefits for six months. I couldn’t wait to start working.

“It was all alien to me. I never wanted to come here; I was really catapulted to another country. My first job was in an Italian restaurant, Bizzaro, in Paddington. It was tough. The war was raging in Bosnia; I was washing dishes. Then I went to another place and learnt how to cook: pizza, pasta, then I became head chef. I worked in bars, as a waiter, manager, then as an area manager in Caffè Uno, then Starbucks.

“I started Firezza in 2001, with a friend from Mostar. We saw a real opportunity in gourmet-pizza delivery. We had some money

but not much. We had help from friends [who helped with everything from design to lending money] to build up the business. Now we have some private investors. We have won awards from Papa – the Pizza, Pasta and Italian Food Association – four years in a row. There were times when the cash flow wasn't good. But now, with 17 sites, it's self-funding.

“I had to do everything by myself. When you're not in a position to rely on your parents, you try harder. Actually, I wouldn't change it for anything now. As scary as it sounds, I think it's a great advantage. It kind of makes you more focused, more determined to succeed.”

For more: [firezza.com](http://firezza.com)

### **The actor: Noma Dumezweni**

*Born: Swaziland, 1969*

*Arrived in the UK: 1977*



Actor Noma Dumezweni will play an adult Hermione Granger in the West End production of 'Harry Potter and the Cursed Child' from July (Anna Huix)

“I got a phone call asking me to take on the part of Linda [the eponymous lead in Penelope Skinner’s current play at the Royal Court, which Kim Cattrall withdrew from a week before opening]. I was terrified, but I heard myself saying yes. We didn’t have any rehearsal, really; I had the script in hand for opening night, but you’ve just got to honour the play and be in the moment. [Dumezweni has received glowing reviews.]

“My parents are South African, but they left [due to apartheid] and we moved as refugees through Botswana, Kenya and Uganda. Then I moved to Ipswich with just my mum and sister; I didn’t speak to my father again until I went back to South Africa 30 years later.

“It was like a change of colour, going from Africa to England. But I think it was easier in the 1970s – when you think of Yarl’s Wood and the detention of [migrant] women and children today... I don’t think I would be where I am now if we’d had to face that.

“I wasn’t very academic at school, but the Wolsey Youth Theatre was the saving of me. I tried twice to get into drama school and didn’t, so I worked my way up through the fringe. I moved to London, and it’s a cliché to say that London is a melting pot, but it’s true – I didn’t stand out any more.

“After Linda, I start rehearsals for the first play I’m directing, I See You, by the South African playwright Mongiwekhaya. The Royal Court asked me to direct; I do always have a lot to say in the rehearsal room! We’re taking it to Johannesburg’s Market Theatre after, which will be incredible.”

*‘Linda’ is at the Royal Court, London SW1, until Saturday; ‘I See You’ is at the theatre from 25 February to 26 March. Dumezweni will play an adult Hermione Granger in the West End production of ‘Harry Potter and the Cursed Child’ from July*

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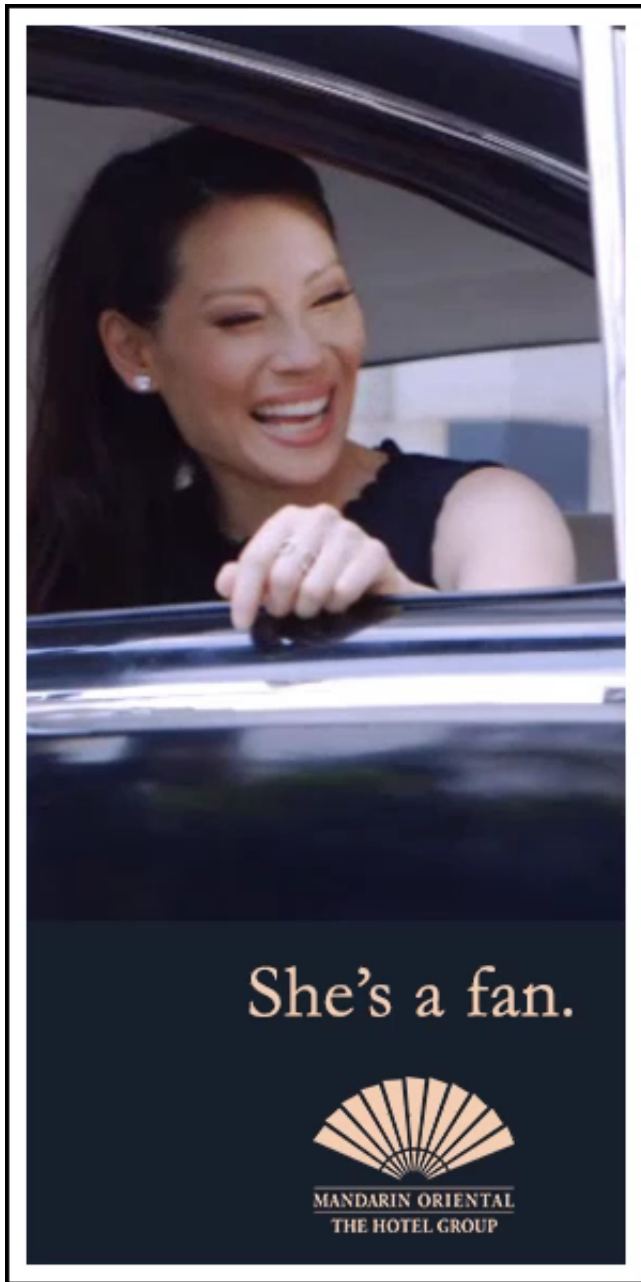
**Robert Tiser**

124 days ago

Good to see. All of these individuals have clearly enriched Britain and will continue to do so. I think that Japanese born but very British Kazuo Ishiguro is one of our best living novelists too.

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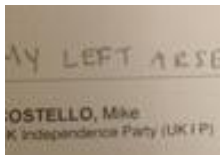
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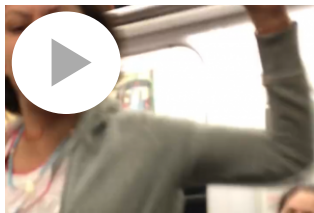
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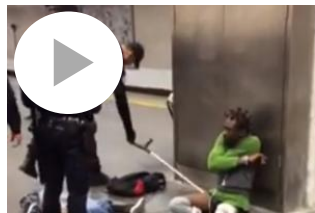
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