Neither Here nor There: The Immigrant Condition in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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1 Introduction

For anyone who has been acquainted with the complexities that life has to offer a certain qualm about one’s identity is not unfamiliar at all. With The Buddha of Suburbia Hanif Kureishi has written a eulogy on the manifold shapes of a person’s identity. The novel is a glorification of the omnipresence of man’s hybrid nature. Its protagonist – named Karim Amir – is a man of mixed origin living in a London suburb, the progeny of a Pakistani immigrant and an English woman, but the dilemmas he faces concerning his identity could have been any man’s. In Kureishi’s representation of England Karim is a “radically deconstructive presence in a world obsessed with clear-cut definitions of cultural or ethnic identity” (Schoene 118). Because of the erroneousness of this obsession Kureishi has created Karim as a mirror image for all those suffering from the fixation on “clear-cut definitions” of their identity. The writer wants to expose the multiple identities one has and disseminate the idea “that those identities do not remain the same, that they are frequently contradictory, that they cross-cut one another, that they tend to locate us differently at different moments” (Hall, Old and New 59).

An essential facet of identity which Kureishi scrutinizes, is the at times nebulously defined yet deeply felt national identity. He seeks to define the “public forms of identity like nationality and ethnicity not as ‘found’ or, indeed, foundational, but as socially constructed and therefore always already provisional” (Moore-Gilbert 128). A chief world-historical event which has influenced “socially constructed” definitions of national identity is immigration. In his depiction of Karim and the other characters as well Kureishi particularly intends to rename and extend the conventional formations of Englishness. Because Karim is an Englishman “with qualifications” (Stein 116) who experiences a feeling of both Englishness and
Indianness, the “East exists as an underground presence within western identity” (Moore-Gilbert 129). Kureishi’s similar descent provides him with firsthand information on the peculiar circumstances of how it must be for a man of mixed origin to grow up in England:

I came from two worlds ... There was my Pakistani family, my uncles, aunts and so on. Then there was my English family, who were lower-middle or working class. My grandfather had pigeons and grey-hounds and all that. And having an Indian father ... So, finding my way through all that ... I wrote all those books to make sense of it. (Leith 8)

In the discussion of Karim’s affiliations the essential idea for understanding his predicament is the fact that he is both an outsider and an insider. That is why his Englishness is experienced as problematic and also explains that he cannot be fully accepted as an Indian, even if Karim himself realizes that “in some way these [i.e. the Indians] were my people” (Kureishi, The Buddha 212). The fact that “Kureishi’s England is a racist society” (Kaleta 205) and few of its inhabitants dare to acknowledge that so many people like Karim alter the English nation, only exacerbates Karim’s problems. When Homi K. Bhabha contends that “in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid – neither the one thing nor the other” (33) he could also have been referring to the self-created and illusionary idea of the English nation who does not take into account the influence of the racial ‘Other’. In the light of the Other’s culture every traditional concept of the English culture will be reborn and reinterpreted. Just like Caryl Phillips attempts with A Distant Shore – which starts as follows: “England has changed. These days it’s difficult to tell who’s from around here and who’s not. Who belongs and who’s a stranger” (3) – Kureishi wants to “show how things are changing under the skin of
England. I want to chart the pricking of a certain kind of imperial inflation” (Kureishi, *Outskirts and Other Plays* 122).

As his *Englishness* and *Indianness* are Karim’s most important affiliations both are the ascriptions which he actively seeks to revoke. I will follow Schoene’s train of thought when he contends that “Karim aims to struggle free of society’s restrictive frame” (119) but will have to disagree on the possibility for Karim of a “free realization of his individuality” (Schoene 120) because he cannot completely leave behind his affiliations.

Karim often has the feeling of being “here and there, of belonging and not” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 3) for the reason that he is acquainted with both the perspective of outsider and insider. Due to this *in-betweenness* it is problematic for him to find or create a foundation. Even if Moore-Gilbert states that any form of identity is “socially constructed” (128), this does not necessarily exclude the fact that Karim will initially go on a quest for foundations. But gradually Karim will discover that he has to search for “the resources within” himself. As Sivanandan also comments: “I am at home in myself” (16), meaning that he has accepted himself as a “radically deconstructive presence” (Schoene 118) and has realised that how he *acts* truly defines who he *is*. Thus, how one acts in a cosmopolitan city like London becomes more important for the quest for identity than any attempt to “reach closure through (solipsistic) self-reflection” (Moore-Gilbert 128).

Salman Rushdie has made a lucid contribution to the study of hybridity which can be quoted in order to shed some light on the complex concept:

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of
human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves.

(Imaginary Homelands 394)

In my discussion of hybridity I will focus more on Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space but it is enlightening to realise that Rushdie’s definition is not irreconcilable with Bhabha’s concept, despite Susie Thomas’ claim. Rushdie speaks of “an intermingling” of “human beings, cultures, ideas,” etc. whereas Bhabha argues – according to Thomas – that “cultural differences are not synthesized into a new ‘third term’ but continue to exist in a hybrid ‘Third Space’” (63). According to Thomas both statements – from Rushdie and Bhabha – contradict one another. But since I will contend that Karim is a fictional inhabitant of Bhabha’s Third Space and also the best example of how different identities within one person surrender to one another, Karim Amir is the ‘living’ proof – assuming that people like Karim do exist – that both statements can be reconciled. Subsequently I will investigate hybridity in relation to sex and sexuality, and the relationship hybridity has with the forms of theatricality discussed in the novel.

Not every character in *The Buddha of Suburbia* belongs to this Third Space. Therefore it can be illuminating to examine the ideas of those people who tenaciously believe in a homogeneous yet illusionary identity. The theoretical frame for this section will be taken from Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, more specifically from
the chapter “Of Mimicry and Man”. It is Karim’s father Haroon, who twice induces a
rebirth in England which can be perceived as an act of mimicry.

In the section that focuses on the perception of the racial ‘Other’ I will
propagate the transparent yet noteworthy idea that most of the problems which the
racial ‘Other’ experiences come into existence because of the rudimentarily formed
ideas which westerners have imposed on them. The way in which Judith Butler and
Gayatri Spivak define “the nation-state as a hyphenated reality” (49) in Who sings the
Nation-State? will prove to be supportive for the further development of how the
former English Empire tries to exclude the racial ‘Other’ from their phantasmagorical
society.

“Kureishi is always scrupulous in presenting Asian Britain as a patchwork of
peoples from diverse parts of the subcontinent, with different languages, religions
and values” (Moore-Gilbert 201), thus challenging the stereotypical ideas which exist
about the racial ‘Other’. Therefore Kureishi cannot be called a spokesperson for one
sole community, despite the fact that others perceive him as a post-colonial writer
who represents the racial ‘Other’ in England. Just like Karim and his father, Kureishi
is laden with what Kobena Mercer has called “the burden of representation” (qtd. in
Moore-Gilbert 7): all three men are “subjected to strong pressure to put their work at
the service of the social group to which they are supposed to belong” (Moore-Gilbert
18). The final discussed technique which Kureishi employs to challenge the
stereotypes is his ironic manner of pandering to prejudices. In the way he for instance
lets Haroon talk about Eastern spirituality Kureishi parodies the westerner’s view on
Oriental wisdom.
2 Identity’s hybrid form

2. 1 Introduction

2. 1. 1 Novel beginnings: an Englishman with qualifications

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don’t care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (Kureishi *The Buddha of Suburbia* 3)

In Kureishi’s first novel, the protagonist – Karim Amir – starts off his narration with an ambiguous statement with which he nevertheless attempts to isolate a specific and definitive aspect of his identity but fails to do so. Besides the fact that English is the official nationality given to him, Karim feels that there is enough proof that vindicates his statement that he is an Englishman. But the element of doubt in “almost” that is invoked at the end of what seemed a confident assertion reveals a tension of some kind. What more legitimation apart from being “born and bred” in a certain country does one need in order to be considered a fully-fledged member of that society? For Karim Amir this is not enough because he – and this fact also causes the tension when he endeavours to define his identity – has “emerged from two old histories”. The main concern for Karim is that he has to acknowledge that within him lies an “inescapable hybridity and intermixture of ideas” (Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* xi). As far as this first paragraph of *The Buddha of Suburbia* goes, an indication is given that other people may have issues with this “new breed”. The
trouble for Karim himself is that his hybridity initially confronts him with a blurred mirror image. It is as if the “odd mixture” that flows through his veins obliges him to give a self-characterization dependent on approximations (Mark Stein, 116). The hybrid cocktail of “continents and bloods” prohibits him of comfortably appropriating one single term and therefore he falls in between a “here and there”, a feeling of “belonging and not”. Yet when Karim phrases in three varying ways that he is an Englishman, it is clear that this is what he unflinching seeks to establish. On this idea Mark Stein rightfully comments that “what he does in fact establish is that he is ‘an Englishman’ with qualifications” (116). Not only do these qualifications stem from who he actually is, but also from how he is perceived. Karim has an Indian father and inherited his darker skin colour, due to which he is socially visible and may be perceived as an immigrant. Thus Karim experiences an immersion into the culture of the English in which he is born, but is at the same time painfully acquainted with the feeling of being forced to stand at the margins of this culture. As Stein formulates it in his introduction to Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation, Karim’s situation “emphasizes the condition of an ambivalent cultural attachment. It reveals the status of the insider who simultaneously knows the perspective of an outsider” (xii).

2. 1. 2 The immigrant as Everyman

The remark about Hanif Kureishi’s novels in general by Stein, namely that his “novels play between external ascriptions and active affiliations, and the assumption that ethnicity is partly chosen” (113), is especially true of The Buddha of Suburbia. In his second novel – The Black Album – Kureishi sends his fictional offspring on a quest for a definite and clear-cut identity, but Karim and the other characters of The Buddha of Suburbia roam an urban landscape which is thickly strewn with a variety of cultural, social, and ethnic identities, a place where few people are inclined to settle
on one specific identity and belong to just one group. Someone may for instance temporarily yet actively affiliate him- or herself with the Indian culture notwithstanding that this person has no ethnic connections to India. Thus, The Buddha of Suburbia “disrespects conventional boundaries and refrains from placing its characters exclusively within one type of formation, be it an ethnic group, a cultural group, or a class. Instead, characters are ‘afloat’ within the orbit of divergent groups. Affiliation is actively sought and not inherited” (Stein 115). The greatest achievement in this respect is the creation of the character of Karim. A thorough study of his psyche and actions reveals an enormous amount of information about the hybrid condition of modern man’s identity. In this respect someone remarks to Karim that “the immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century” (Kureishi, The Buddha 141). Even if Karim is not an immigrant – this assumption is a prejudice of the speaker, probably due to Karim’s skin colour but even more so to the speaker’s flawed dichotomous thoughts – the remark in itself concerning the Everyman-status is not so incorrect. It is arguably true that Karim’s sense of acquired identity is representative of a lot of people’s attitude towards identity, regardless of their – or their parents’ – migratory nature. The Everyman-status of the immigrant is a significant idea in Kureishi’s oeuvre which he already expressed in 1981: “the immigrant is a kind of Everyman, a representative of the movements and aspirations of millions of people” (Kureishi, Borderline 4). Just like Karim, “millions of people” are not inclined to settle on one specific identity. And that is why Kureishi, as a writer, “is able to address people through the multiple identities which they have” and knows that it is of chief importance “to wake up, to grow up, to come into the world of contradiction” (Hall, Old and New 59).
2. 2 External ascriptions (revoked)

_The Buddha of Suburbia_ can be perceived as a postethnic novel according to David Hollinger’s definition: “a postethnic perspective favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds” (3). Despite this predilection for voluntary affiliations and Stein’s contention that “affiliation is actively sought”, one cannot overlook the aspects of Karim’s life that are predetermined by external circumstances. Because of all the attention that is given to Kureishi’s fastidiously sketched representation of free choice, it could be forgotten that Karim is also a subject of “communities of descent”. What Stuart Hall states about black identity is equally true for an Indian identity: “black identity today is autonomous and not tradable” (_Frontlines and Backyards_ 127). So when Berthold Schoene contends that “any prepackaged identity or definitive self-image are rejected as encumbrances obstructive to the free realization of his individuality, which is essentially protean, dynamic, in flux” (121), I agree with his view of Karim as someone striving for a “dynamic” and “free realization of his individuality”. Nevertheless it is my belief that no one can shed – at least not entirely – certain pre-packaged aspects of one’s shared and personal history. Karim’s individuality is therefore grounded within certain borders that he cannot escape.

Successively the following predetermining facets – and their specific problems – will be discussed: first of all the fact that Karim grew up in England. This makes England the closest thing to what can be regarded as his homeland – despite the many racist encounters with its other inhabitants who feel that they are truly the people of England and have clear-cut and straightforward ideas of belonging. Karim,
though, never mentions the concept of ‘a homeland’, not even in discussions in which the subject of origins is tackled. Secondly, Karim’s attitude towards the Indians will be examined. It is more than his visibility as someone of mixed heritage that makes him feel connected to an *Indianness*, one that lies inside him. Subsequently, Karim’s attempts at revoking his affiliations will be shown. And finally, it is worth devoting some thought to affiliations other than the ethnic ones. The “intermixture of ideas” (*The Black Atlantic* xi) that Paul Gilroy mentions is not only about features which have to do with ethnicity and culture. Therefore it is also useful to look at Karim’s class background, since this has the ability to impact heavily upon a person’s development. Despite my assertion that this affiliation is not a part of Karim’s ethnicity, I do not intend to disregard the relations between Karim’s class on the one hand and his ethnicity on the other.

2. 2. 1 A problematic *Englishness*

Quite a few times Karim employs the pronoun ‘we’ and in doing so, he identifies himself with a certain group. What is remarkable is that he does not find it necessary to further elucidate which specific group of people this is. To him it is obvious which group he is talking about, even if – as it turns out – he is not always referring to, and therefore identifying himself with, the same group. Without much conscious thought Karim fraternizes with the English when he for example draws a parallel between an Indian’s perception of England and their – i.e. the English, including him – perception of Sweden. The Indian man in question is Changez, quite a significant character since he is “the man walking towards England” (*Kureishi, The Buddha* 78) in the course of the novel and therefore offers the reader an insightful view of how rapidly and profoundly the attitudes of an immigrant can change. Because Changez has undergone too much influence of English writers such as Spillane, James Hadley
Chase, or Harold Robbins, he thinks that in England all his sexual desires will be fulfilled, leading Karim to refer to him as “a man recently married and completely celibate who saw Britain as we saw Sweden: as the goldmine of sexual opportunity” (Kureishi, The Buddha 96, emphasis added). Even if in this case Karim identifies himself with the English without a problem, he is not always this keen on joining their society. As Stein also remarks: “Karim Amir often takes an outsider’s perspective when speaking about white English society” (122). He for instance compares the English to “clumsy giraffes” (Kureishi, The Buddha 4) and expresses his disapproval of their habits when stating that how the English “sleep and eat is enough to make you want to emigrate to Italy” (Kureishi, The Buddha 220). After Karim has dropped out of school he embarks on a career in the world of theatre. During his performances he does not feel daunted by the exposure he has to go through, but is very much intimidated by the specific fact that “four hundred white faces” (Kureishi, The Buddha 228, emphasis added) will stare at him. These examples make sufficiently clear that Karim’s relationship with the English – the white English – can be called problematic. Nevertheless there exists a connection between him and the English society which he cannot break. This bond cannot be misunderstood as a relationship of reciprocal hate, since it is definitely more variable than that. So, a first involuntary affiliation that is established – and partially revoked at times – is Karim’s trait which we can conveniently refer to as his Englishness.

2. 2. 2 An Orpington Indianness

But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in some way these were my people, and that I’d spent my life denying or avoiding that fact. I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I’d been colluding
with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them. Partly I blamed Dad for this. After all, like Anwar, for most of his life he’d never shown any interest in going back to India... So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it. (Kureishi, The Buddha 212-213).

Karim feels that he betrayed the Indianness inside him by not acknowledging his Indian roots and letting the demands of his Indian family fall on deaf ears. Karim does view the Indians as “strange creatures”, but more importantly, the gap between him and the Indian culture seems unbridgeable. It is as if he is shipwrecked on a cliff a few miles short of reaching the Indian coastline, able to distinguish the vague lines of the shore but unable to reach dry land. This inability has everything to do with the absence of someone who can take Karim by the hand and guide him through the Indian culture which is indeed one “half” of him. Hence he rightfully remarks that he will have to create it himself, reach out to his Indianness relying in the first place on his own strength and willingness to discover.

Karim spends quite some time with the family of Haroon’s friend Anwar, who joined Haroon when he left India for England. Anwar is married to Jeeta, an alleged princess who comes from Indian nobility, and they have one daughter together, Jamila. Karim always feels welcome and at ease in this Indian family, which he regards as a second home. When Jamila marries Changez and leaves the parental home for a small apartment, Karim experiences this as an opportunity to have one more place to go to. Just like Karim, Jamila is born and brought up in England, but she feels even more than Karim that she cannot repudiate her Indian background. Her husband, Changez, might be enchanted by all his new discoveries in England, but Karim is still aware of a connection with him as well as with Jamila, which he
cannot deny. As he puts it himself: “the three of us were bound together by ties stronger than personality, and stronger than the liking or disliking of each other” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 214).

The house of Karim’s parents is located in a dreary London suburb where few black Britons live. This fact made him feel ill at ease because more often than desired attention was drawn to him for reasons that he could not control. When he moved to a more centrally located area of London he noticed with great relief that “there were thousands of black people everywhere, so I wouldn’t feel exposed” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 121). Thus he experiences problems with this *Indianness* but otherwise sometimes actively affiliates himself to Indian people such as Jamila and Changez. Karim is partly an Indian, one who is born and bred in a London suburb called Orpington.

2. 2. 3 Revoking the affiliations

During the ontological quest – not for identity, but a quest that is the identity – Karim attains a certain degree of freedom because he succeeds in balancing the thin line that separates indifference from the proper amount of attachment. This proper amount verges on a total lack of attachment and enables Karim to leave certain affiliations behind him, despite “this pertinence of ethnic affiliations” (Stein 121) that characterizes the novel. Butler and Spivak state that “freedom cannot pre-exist this call”, this call being the call of freedom, a questioning of what freedom is and how it can be achieved, “but can only exist in its exercise” (48). For Karim to exercise his freedom, he soon realizes that he has to add a certain dose of egotism to his actions. This, for instance, safeguards him from drowning in the pool of familial problems. When his father leaves his mother and goes to live with another woman, Karim
envisages the possible positive effects this can have on his personal life, thereby keeping the emotional disturbance at bay. The son of his father’s new partner, named Charlie, is one of the people that Karim has a serious crush on. So all he has to do is appreciate that this new relationship “meant I’d be connected to Charlie for years and years” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 69).

Another important affiliation Karim dares to turn his back on is his Indian origin. When Jamila tells Karim that her father has arranged a marriage for her, Karim is very sympathetic and tells her he will do everything that is in his power to help her. The audience actually takes Karim’s helpfulness for granted because he has to know how problematic growing up in England can be for someone with an Indian background. He is confronted with racism several times and has all the trouble in the world keeping himself standing against the prejudices which surround the theatrical milieu. So for sure he must comprehend Jamila’s predicament when she does not know whether to obey her father’s wish – which means marrying against her will – or run away and break the connection with her family. Amazingly enough Karim displays a terrible lack of commitment towards his friend and is completely enraptured by his own sudden twist towards good fortune: “that morning I was so ecstatic about my triumph in seducing the dog-owner’s daughter that I’d completely forgotten about Jamila’s big decision” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 82). It is significant, though, that Karim does not use the name of the girl whom he has seduced, but refers to her as “the dog-owner’s daughter”. This man is an adherent of Enoch Powell and has racially abused Karim and told him that he could never see his daughter again. Therefore Karim’s “triumph” must feel like an act of revoking his ethnicity. It is a personal victory over his ethnicity-related problems. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Jamila he has lost all his credibility: “No, I’m not going to talk to you. Karim, you’re basically a selfish
person, uninterested in anyone else” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 170). And she is right in some respects, because more than once Karim distances himself from his *Indianness*. Jamila’s parents, for instance, have to deal with racism a lot: the walls of their shop are smeared with filth, and messages full of hatred are written all over the shop. But Karim can only acknowledge that “it was true that I hadn’t been to see Jeeta or Anwar for a long time” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 136).

Thus when Karim remarks, “I’m probably not compassionate or anything, I bet I’m a real bastard inside and don’t care for anyone” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 104), this might appear correct at first sight. But actually it shows the poor condition of Karim’s self-knowledge, since there is more to glean from his behaviour. When his egotism takes the upper hand, this quite often happens because he is revoking his affiliations. We know that Karim feels connected to Jamila and Changez, because of their shared ethnic affiliations. But it is as if at times he wants to get rid of this connection between the three of them, as if he does not want to be Indian all the time simply because he does not feel Indian all the time. And so it occurs that in a very hurtful way, Karim enlarges the distance between himself – and his hybrid nature – and Jamila and Changez: Karim goes to bed once more with Jamila after her wedding, and Changez catches them. Karim afterwards has the “feeling I’d betrayed everyone” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 109), even himself. And if he was even more accurate, he would have remarked that he betrayed his Indian background and at the same time have realised that this is not necessarily a definite act.

This is the evidence that he has taken the right “to reject those parties who have all too fixed expectations of him” (Stein 122). And not only do the white English have their fixed expectations with regard to how Karim must act, speak, and look, also his Indian friends are surprised at Karim’s behaviour and even give their opinion
on how Karim could change for the better. Changez, for instance, calls Karim “very
daring and non-conformist” and gives him the following bizarre advice: “your father
should go back home for some years and take you with him. Perhaps to a remote
village” (Kureishi, The Buddha 97). Going back to India can be interpreted as a
narrow-minded solution with the sole purpose of imposing a straitjacket onto Karim
which has to make him more Indian again. So Karim escapes from enforced ethnic
uniformity inflicted on him not only by the white English people, but also by his Indian
friends. In this constantly on-going process of escaping (and returning to) his
affiliations lies Karim’s exercise of freedom. Schoene analyses Karim and his search
for freedom in the following manner:

Karim aims to struggle free of society’s restrictive frame of Bildung and
its manipulative power of inscription. Karim will not relinquish his vague
idea of who he might be only because his particular sense of self is not
listed in society’s catalogue of traditional identities. Karim is free
continuously to reinvent his identity which - due to the 'creamy' colour of
his skin, his nomadic lifestyle and bisexual inclinations - remains
ultimately unintelligible within the framework of the society he inhabits.
(119)

2. 2. 4 A parallel between ethnicity and class

The time has come now to look at another essential predetermining aspect of Karim’s
identity that cannot be taken for an ethnic affiliation, namely his class background.
However, one might argue that the class to which Karim and the rest of his family
belongs – which is “lower middle class” (Kureishi, The Buddha 270) – is connected to
Haroon’s racial background and therefore also to Karim’s ethnic affiliations. To
exemplify the connection, let us bring forth the following remark by Haroon which he makes in a discussion with his friend Anwar, who has a successful grocery store. Anwar does not comprehend why Haroon so languidly drags himself to work without attempting to reach a higher position. Then Haroon replies to Anwar: ‘“the whites will never promote us,’ Dad said. ‘Not an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth. You don’t have to deal with them – they still think they have an Empire when they don’t have two pennies to rub together”’ (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 27). Karim shares his father’s opinion that it is truly complicated for an Indian man to compete with the white English. In the next quote Karim is talking about his mother, but the reader can only guess that this is his mother’s actual thought. But the fact that the idea stems from Karim’s mind makes it very likely that he backs this idea: “once I remember Mum looking reproachfully at Dad, as if to say: What husband are you to give me so little when the other men, the Alans and Barrys and Peters and Roys, provide cars, houses, holidays, central heating and jewellery?” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 29). For Alan, Barry, Peter and Roy it is far less complicated to make a decent income and make themselves and their families belong to the affluent part of a western society than it is for Haroon and his family, is what Karim intends to say.

Nevertheless, Karim has accepted that he originally comes from the suburbs of London and also that he is lower middle class – but not as a permanent state, because he intends to move on. And despite all the troubles he experiences, he is able to isolate his class background as one characteristic of his identity and is capable of comparing himself to others without taking anything else into consideration. This happens when he is confronted for the first time with the punk scene in London and shocked at how they are “dressed with an abandonment and originality we’d never imagined possible”. Karim states that he “began to understand
what London meant and what class of outrage we had to deal with. It certainly put us in proportion” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 129). His class consciousness will provide him with an even stronger emotion:

> What infuriated me - what made me loathe both them and myself - was their confidence and knowledge. The easy talk of art, theatre, architecture, travel; the languages, the vocabulary, knowing the way round a whole culture – it was invaluable and irreplaceable capital ... hard words and sophisticated ideas were in the air they breathed from birth, and this language was the currency that bought you the best of what the world could offer. But for us it could only ever be a second language, consciously acquired. (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 177-178)

Due to nothing more than the wages and descent of his parents and the specific upbringing that emanated from this, Karim feels inferior in the presence of these upper class people. He “was frightened of their confidence, education, status, money, and was beginning to see how important they were” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 174). Because of Kureishi's specific turn of phrase a parallel is drawn between Karim's inferiority with regard to the upper class people and the newly arrived immigrant with regard to the stereotypical Englishman by birth. If the immigrant attempts to accomplish the same things as this Englishman, then he will have to work at least twice as hard. Many things that the Englishman takes for granted will have to be “consciously acquired” by the immigrant, just as English will forever be only his “second language”. The fact that this parallel is made by Kureishi could indicate that it is not incorrect to view Karim as someone who has to struggle against some of the same forces that smother the immigrant's chances of a peaceful life. Furthermore it is his class background that makes it so complex to penetrate this world of
“irreplaceable capital”. Bart Moore-Gilbert also contends that “[o]nto the trajectory of Karim’s escape from his class origins, Kureishi grafts an archetypically postcolonial imagery of ‘translation’” (112).

But at least Karim is honest enough to admit that he is not completely without responsibility when he dropped out of school without consulting anyone, thus throwing away quite a few chances of acquiring confidence and knowledge: “how misinformed! Why didn’t we understand that we were happily condemning ourselves” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 170). Since he cheerily took part in his own downfall, he now realizes that it is also up to him to fight his way back and acquire a more satisfying position. Regardless of the fact that he can never fully scour the mark of his class background off, he is at least pervaded by the urge to make an attempt: “I’d left my world; I had to, to get on” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 178). One critic who believes that Karim can never achieve the values of the upper class world is Schoene: “Communally sanctioned, these values remain impervious to the emergent counter-discursive homogenization processes of post-imperial cosmopolitanism” (117). What Schoene means by these “processes” is that the end of the Empire has created a chance for people like Karim – with a legacy that points back to a former colony – to be treated equally with the ex-colonizer in the heart of the former Empire. So Schoene believes in this homogenization – and thus an exchange in values and opportunities – between people from different ethnic backgrounds, but states that it will be replaced by the seemingly indestructible division of class, whose values are “communally sanctioned” and unreachable for people like Karim who belong to a minority group. Nevertheless, Karim’s development as an actor proves that upward mobility in the hierarchical English society is not so improbable. One could argue that he *is* confined because he always has to play Asian characters, but let us not forget
that this is only a fictional identity which does not define his entire person. My idea on Karim’s upward mobility is more in line with Moore-Gilbert’s statement that “The Buddha celebrates the determination of protagonists from various kinds of margin to better themselves socially” (111) and that the novel is about “the emergence of a new social subject which challenges traditional conceptions of class identity” (112).

2. 3 The creation of an in-betweenness

2. 3. 1 Neither here nor there

The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations... – black and white. (Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic

1)

In the same manner Karim stands in between his Indianness and Englishness. The greatest merit of Paul Gilroy, with regard to this quotation, is that he acknowledges and has disseminated the insightful idea that the experience and essence of being white or black has undergone a transformation over the years and been influenced by the ever-changing modern world. It is because most of the people that inhabit the world of The Buddha of Suburbia ignore or deny this basic fact that Karim’s in-betweenness counts as a problematic experience: “Karim sees himself as consisting of torn halves, a conception he introduces in the opening paragraph. This raises the
question of how these two halves interact, how they feed upon each other, and in
how far they remain irreconciled to each other” (Stein 121).

Both halves do feed upon each other indeed, and although Stein does not
mention it, this happens in a twofold way – a positive and a negative one. The degree
of reconciliation between the two halves is dependent on how they feed on each
other: if this happens in a positive manner then both halves are reconciled, but if it is
a negative one then there is no reconciliation at all. What do we mean by this positive
and negative way? In an optimistic line of reasoning both halves – the Indian and the
English – are known to be changing and to even grow closer to each other. The
Indian and English spheres will intersect with each other and both will contain
elements of one another. They feed upon each other in a natural way, but what can
only make this positive is that this process is rightly perceived by all participants of
society. Then it will be accepted and seen as natural that Karim’s Indianness is
expressed in English and comes with an Orpington accent, instead of being
expressed in Urdu, which is his father’s mother tongue. In the same manner it will be
accepted that his Englishness radiates from his Indian skin. Thus, with regard to the
positive way, we can conclude that both halves are not torn but coexist in a peaceful
manner.

To shed some light on the negative way of reciprocated feeding we must leave
the optimistic reasoning behind us in favour of a more realistic – or at least more in
line with the realistic elements of The Buddha of Suburbia – train of thought. A key
idea for understanding the negativity which leads to the torn halves is the internal
difficulties within each half. Whenever Karim feels it is problematic for his Indian side
to be accepted he will apply more of his English side so that the Indianness is not
that visible anymore. This is what he means when he talks about “those whites who
wanted Indians to be like them” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 212). Similarly he will go looking for support among the English aspects that define him whenever his Indian half is questioned. For instance, he feels insecure among the Indians when “they weren’t speaking English, so I didn’t know exactly what was said” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 81). All of this leads to a self-regulating process that ensnares Karim in a vicious circle. Problems with his Indian side stir him in the direction of his English side and vice versa.

As a result, Karim finds himself more often than desired in this no man’s land of *in-betweenness*. For that reason he describes himself in the opening paragraph in opposing terms such as “here and there”. In *The Black Album* the narrator declares that “these days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew – brandishing whichever features they could claim, as if without a tag they wouldn’t be human. Shahid too, wanted to belong to his people” (Kureishi 92). For Karim one identity or one type of belonging to ‘his people’ is not an option, for he will always be spread out over – and amidst – several identities.

2.3.2 A quest for foundations

An exploration into the nature of Karim and the processes that seem to define him may at first be a disturbing experience which makes the explorer wonder why he or she ever embarked on such a journey. But when most of his veins are located, their connections and meanings become apparent. Soon after that an artery is found, one that dictates the rhythm, one that points out to you that no real artery ever beats to the same rhythm continually. After all, how could Karim remain an enigma if Kureishi himself claims that “as a writer, I try not to get too abstract. I’m interested in individual men and women and how they try to get by with what they have” (Kumar 126). What
makes Karim a complex character to understand is that he is one of those people who “are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall, Cultural Identity and Diaspora 235). When Stuart Hall further on comments that “young black cultural practitioners and critics in Britain are increasingly coming to acknowledge and explore in their work this ‘diasporic aesthetic’ and its formations in the post-colonial experience” (Cultural Identity and Diaspora 236), he could have easily been referring to Kureishi. Even if Karim Amir is not an example of someone who directly endured a diasporic experience, for sure Karim’s story can be inscribed in this ‘diasporic aesthetic’. Especially because it has been established that Karim’s quest is similar to the peregrinations of an immigrant (cf. 2. 2. 4).

At the start of the novel Karim is seventeen and before this age all the things that happened around him in his family did not relate to him that much or affected him in any profound way. But as soon as his father starts his spiritual journey, on his way to becoming “the future Guru of Chislehurst” (Kureishi, The Buddha 25), everything starts to change. A chain reaction is set in motion, which Karim has to witness: “I could see the erosion in the foundations of our family every day” (Kureishi, The Buddha 87). This process ends in the separation and divorce of Haroon and Margaret, Karim’s mother. When Haroon leaves his wife and youngest son he assumes that Karim will join him, ignorant of the possibility that Karim could be disturbed by these events and confident that the boy will turn out just fine. But when Karim tells his father that he is “not in the right mood for studying. I’m too disturbed by all the stuff that’s happening. You leaving Mum and all. It’s a big deal. It affects my life” (Kureishi, The Buddha 110), Haroon is at pains to hold back his tears. Even if – and most likely this is the case – Karim only throws this accusation in his father’s face
as an excuse for his deplorable exam results, there is more truth in it than he initially dares to admit.

At the time when the relationship between his parents still stood like a sturdy yet dull house, Karim was able to build on their “foundations” and was secure of a safe haven. At the sudden shock which swept this all away from under his feet Karim feels momentarily lost. So when he gets pampered by all the girls at his new school he openheartedly says that “I liked it all, because I was lonely for the first time in my life, and an itinerant” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 94). His suppressed homesickness – especially the safety and familiarity which is lost – comes haunting him even long after his parents have separated. When Karim sees his mother with another man he remarks that “somehow I’d expected an Indian to be sitting with her” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 270). This signifies that the unity of his parents was by far the strongest legitimation of his existence as a man of mixed origin.

2. 3. 3 The resources within

How far can one go in terms of one’s own personal development and in what degree can an “affiliation be revoked” (Stein 115)? One thing is certain, Karim is always negotiating the limits of his involuntary affiliations, “a negotiation which is part of the novel’s brief” (116), according to Stein. When Karim’s father unexpectedly – at least for his wife and sons – turns to an amalgam of spiritual knowledge from the East, Karim as well discovers a new world. Since this all starts in the beginning of the novel, the audience gets to know Karim at a crucial point in his life. As it happens, during one of his father’s spiritual sessions for interested fellow Londoners, Karim experiences an epiphany to which he will dedicate his further life:
As I sat there with my trousers down, taking it all in, I had an extraordinary revelation. I could see my life clearly for the first time: the future and what I wanted to do. I wanted to live always this intensely: mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs. I hadn’t come upon it all like this before, and now I wanted nothing else. The door to the future had opened: I could see which way to go. (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 15)

The goal which Karim sets himself seems so simple, and so broad as well, that no one would think that he could come across obstacles which make this goal unreachable. There are a myriad of options available to Karim with regard to the arrangement of his life, if sex, alcohol, drugs, and intelligent people are really all he craves for. What is striking as well is that he does not take into account any of his involuntary affiliations. And possibly these are the things that could bring him into trouble. His epiphany is comparable to his friend Jamila’s wish: “I don’t ‘want’ anything but to live my life in peace” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 84), she tells Karim. But it is exactly her ethnic affiliation that impedes her progression towards a peaceful life. Because her father, after almost two decades of complying with the western traditions, makes a sudden return to his Muslim background and insists on an arranged marriage for his daughter. Also in *The Black Album* the protagonist expresses his wishes and astonishment in the broadest sense possible: "the substantiality of the world, the fact of existence, the inexplicable phenomenon of life, art, humor, and love" (Kureishi 102). In doing so the protagonist shows that at the core of his identity, he is not attached to his Indian background, nor to any other non-self-selected characteristic. This is also what Kureishi seems to imply with Karim’s epiphany. None of his predetermining aspects will be tossed away, but Karim will
attempt to find a way to reach an acceptable compromise between his cravings and the alliances with his hybrid identity.

I am at home in myself; and myself is all these experiences, cultures, value-systems that I have gone through. I don't consider myself an exile because I would have to ask myself then what am I exiled from. At the end of the twentieth century, when all boundaries are breaking down, we should be looking not to roots in some place but to resources within ourselves for our understanding of our place in society, our place in a particular country, our place in culture … I do not understand the question of exile. I do not understand the question of domicile. The heart is where the battle is. (Sivanandan 16)

What Ambalavaner Sivanandan contends here with regard to roots could very well be applied to Karim Amir. His way of coping with his torn halves that stem from a mixed heritage is exactly a search for understanding that starts with the resources within himself. This method is also very effective in warding off the feeling of being homeless or dislocated. As long as he follows this adage, Karim’s identity – however hybrid it may be – shall remain uncorrupted by society’s prejudiced counter-attacks.

2. 3. 4 Hybridity expressed through the earthly frame

Karim’s rendering of his earthly frame is in accordance with how we have described his inside so far. More than merely an interpretation of the hippie culture, his outfit is an exuberant blend of multiple cultures: “I wore turquoise flared trousers, a blue and white flower-patterned see-through shirt, blue suede boots with Cuban heels, and a scarlet Indian waistcoat with gold stitching around the edges. I’d pulled on a headband to control my shoulder-length frizzy hair. I’d washed my face in Old Spice”
(Kureishi, *The Buddha* 6). Does this mean that he is openly celebrating his mixed heritage? It is not the nationality of his parents which clarifies his wardrobe; otherwise he would have consciously limited himself to an expression of Indian and English traits—in fact, he borrows whatever suits him, regardless of the possible affiliations of the clothes. And if he were truly expressing his mixed origins, he would not be fitting in with the rest of the youth as he does now: “the pub was full of kids dressed like me, both from my school and from other schools in the area. Most of the boys, so nondescript during the day, now wore cataracts of velvet and satin, and bright colours; some were in bedspreads and curtains. The little groovers talked esoterically of Syd Barret” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 8). When D’Angelo in the booklet of his album *Voodoo* states that “we have come adorned in the apparel of the anointed: leather and feathers, jeans and t-shirts, linen and cashmere, and even polyester”, we can see the parallel with Karim’s and his friends’ clothing: for the black community in the United States the search for an identity—hybrid as it may be—is also still continuing, despite the unilateral message other black (hip hop) artists are spreading. Karim surely is not the only one who feels “more beige than anything”, even if he is perceived as “officially ‘black’” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 167).

2.3.5 An open ending

The idea that Karim’s freedom stems from his ability to break away from his attachments has already been established, but Karim himself thinks that his freedom—that which makes him so strong—has something to do with a certain survival instinct that he inherited from his dad:

Dad had always felt superior to the British: this was the legacy of his Indian childhood—political anger turning into scorn and contempt. For
him in India the British were ridiculous, stiff, unconfident, rule-bound.
And he’d made me feel that we couldn’t allow ourselves the shame of
failure in front of these people. You couldn’t let the ex-colonialists see
you on your knees, for that was where they expected you to be. They
were exhausted now; their Empire was gone; their day was done and it
was our turn. I didn’t want Dad to see me like this, because he wouldn’t
be able to understand why I’d made such a mess of things when the
conditions had been good, the time so opportune, for advancement.

(Kureishi, The Buddha 250)

It is understandable that Haroon, at a time when he was still living in India, felt so
much scorn for the English, the ex-colonizer. But why should Karim identify himself
with these feelings, if he is and feels as much an Englishman (with qualifications) as
any other ‘lad’? It is true that the days of the Empire are over – although there will
always remain a significant residue of all the harm that the tentacles of colonialism
have caused – and for Karim who is born in this new world order, this could indeed
mean that the time for advancement is upon him. But never in terms of “our turn” as
opposed to the colonizer’s turn, which is in fact a way of thinking reminiscent of
colonial times and perhaps more appropriate for someone like Haroon, who
experienced the latter days of this era. The question with respect to Karim is: how
does it end for him? Is the hybrid nature of his identity generally accepted, or has he
resolved the identity question by making a clear choice? Neither of these questions
can be answered positively, but Kureishi leaves us with an open ending that has
enough optimism to make us believe in a hopeful future:

I could think about the past and what I’d been through as I’d struggled
to locate myself and learn what the heart is. Perhaps in the future I
would live more deeply. And so I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what mess everything had been, but that it wouldn’t always be that way. (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 284)

According to Moore-Gilbert “neither novel [i.e. *The Buddha* and *The Black Album*] fully resolves the issues of cultural belonging which they raise and both end openly and ambiguously” (126). It is an ambiguous ending because Karim is accepted as an Asian character in a soap opera, but not as his hybrid self in society. So the real problem, that (Western) society has not found a way to fully adapt itself to people like Karim, keeps existing. “That it wouldn’t always be that way” is how Kureishi expresses his hope for a change.

2. 4 Hybridity vs. fragmentation

2. 4. 1 The Third Space

We have seen that Karim’s epiphany, his goal in life, is susceptible to a variety of experiences. This causes that Karim’s state, the one that signifies his “dispositional dimensions of life” (Butler and Spivak 4), cannot be moulded into a traditional concept of identity: “as a normative imposition, suggesting coherence and consistency as indispensable constituents of personhood, ’identity’ fails to capture the overwhelmingly chaotic diversity of his life experiences” (Schoene 121). Karim is someone who dons “ethnic roles like masks” (Stein 142), almost embracing his hybridity in a manner which stands in stark contrast to what could be called
fragmentation. And even if each affiliation brings about specific problems, Karim remains relatively safeguarded from the possible confusion these affiliations as a mix might cause. As a counterexample of how such a mix can cause a problematic fragmentation, we can bring Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara* to the fore. The protagonist and eponymous character of this text expresses her doubts and confusion because she cannot find one definite identity within herself, or as Evaristo puts it so beautifully: “where in the silence of the sky I longed for an image, / a story, to speak me, describe me, birth me whole. / Living in my skin, I was, but which one?” (Evaristo 69).

A perceptive statement by Raghavendra Rao, which he actually makes in relation to Rudyard Kipling’s character Kim, gives the readership of *The Buddha of Suburbia* insight into Karim’s psyche and his path of life: “he does not solve the identity problem, but he lives it. And thereby hangs a moral. Some problems can never be resolved epistemologically, they can only be resolved ontologically” (29). If Karim is someone who *is* instead of someone who *knows*, then where *is* he going to? Where can we locate his *being*? Since Karim seems to have found an entirely novel way of existing, we cannot locate him in any specific culture nor in a naively stewed melting pot of multiculturalism. Perhaps Karim is the fictional embodiment of someone who has found the way into the Third Space, a concept which Homi K. Bhabha coined:

A willingness to descend into that alien territory ... may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ - the cutting edge of translation and
negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalistic histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (38-39)

Karim truly thrives in this space of intercultural meeting, where all his different selves – all aspects of his hybrid identity – somehow surrender to one another and materialize afresh as an authentic and powerful being. An individual that is never stable, though, because his newly found community is in a constant process of reconfiguration.

2. 4. 2 The state we are in

Although Karim’s core identity may be resistant against the English society’s counter-attacks, they will always have a certain effect on his state of mind: “we became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and resentment were generated afresh every day?” (Kureishi, The Buddha 227). The reason why “we…proudly stood outside it” is that Karim and the group that he associates himself with (in this case this could be all black Britons) look at the “resources within ourselves” (Sivanandan 16). And as long as British society has not found a way to incorporate all these different types of being English they will continue to stand outside society, despite the large number of outsiders and despite the fact that they are the inhabitants of the real England (in contrast with the phantasmagorical England which still believes it is the ruler over an entire Empire). In Who Sings the Nation-State? Butler and Spivak also point out that a distinction needs
to be made between the “state we are in” (which is Karim’s mental picture of his identity) and the “state” we are in (which is England). Both critics wonder “how do we understand those sets of conditions and dispositions that account for the ‘state we are in’ (which could, after all, be a state of mind) from the ‘state’ we are in when and if we hold rights of citizenship or when the state functions as the provisional domicile for our work?” (2). Rather than providing their audience with a straightforward answer to this question, they indicate that there is a tension between the two states:

it makes sense to see that at the core of this “state” – that signifies both juridical and dispositional dimensions of life – is a certain tension produced between modes of being or mental states, temporary or provisional constellations of mind of one kind or another, and juridical and military complexes that govern how and where we may move, associate, work, and speak. (Butler and Spivak 4)

In the case of Karim no military complexes, or even juridical ones (since he is officially an English citizen), have the power to govern his life. But it is the social complex that has an equally great power with which it can corner Karim and force him into a straitjacket so that his identity can be perceived as a ridiculous yet recognizable image.

Karim is one of those who “wander freely among the noble of Europe’s formerly all-powerful cities” (Phillips, The European Tribe 120). As an outsider and as an inhabitant of the Third Space, Karim feels entitled to claim whatever piece of London appeals to his taste. Therefore he temporarily squats in the manifold urban identities, searching for an image which reflects his personality among the city’s different faces. To resolve the ontological issue of identity this act of claiming the city
is a necessity. Only then will he become accustomed to all the ideas of hybridity that interact with each other within himself. And although Karim once thought that “sometimes I felt the whole world was converging on this little room” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 62), when he was still living in a South London suburb, he will come to see London as an intellectual and sexual playground which possesses an aptitude for obliging to most of his urges. Stein notes that Karim feels at home “among the interstices between different cultures” (121), a remark which is reminiscent of Bhabha’s definition of the Third Space. Karim very literally states that London is as much his as anyone else’s: “what I’d do there when the city belonged to me” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 121), he muses in anticipation of his move. And when he finally arrives there he reiterates this, not allowing for any ambiguity in the reader’s mind as to who are the genuine residents of London, of England even: “so this was London at last, and nothing gave me more pleasure than strolling around my new possession all day” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 126). One could argue that there are plenty of people who want to thwart Karim’s progression into London, take for instance the followers of the National Front. Besides that there are plenty of situations in which people will apply a less overt display of racism. How will this affect people like Karim in their fastidious scrutiny of what is on offer in London? According to Stein these “alienation effects” will only provide people like Karim with a feeling that makes their claim on London even more resolute (65).

It is different for Haroon and he feels hesitant at first to move from the suburbs to London proper. He is highly appreciated as “the Buddha of Suburbia” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 133), and thinks that he will disappear in the metropolis because of the magnitude of London. Karim on the other hand loves London because of its grand stories: “Ghandi himself once had a room here ... the notorious landlord Rachman
kept a flat for the young Mandy Rice-Davies ... and Kristine Keeler” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 126). Also note how Karim refers to people who are linked to significant political situations in India as well as in England, respectively the Indian independence movement and the Profumo Affair.

2.5 Sex and sexuality in relation with hybridity

Karim Amir’s actions represent how he feels and thinks. If we keep in mind Raghavendra’s remark about the ontological quest, this is indeed very obvious: his actions do not represent, but are who he is. Let us scrutinize for instance Karim’s sexual activity and his attitudes and preferences with regard to sex. In the beginning the audience is left in the dark as to whether Karim is a homosexual or not, until he comments on his indeterminate sexual preference himself: “it was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls...I liked being handled by men...but I liked cunts and breasts...I never liked to think much about the whole thing in case I turned out to be a pervert and needed to have treatment” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 55). The reason why he does not want to think about it and says that it is unusual is that his deeds do not have their counterpart in the clear-cut identities proposed by society. It characterizes Karim that he does not make a definitive choice; even his sexual activities are pervaded by a hybridity. As Moore-Gilbert remarks as well: “hybridity is as much figured through Karim’s bisexuality as through his mixed-race origins” (113). The downside of not making any definitive choices when it comes to sexual activities is that there is hardly any room for intimacy. Once you allow yourself to become intimate with someone you have made a choice in favour of that person. Karim’s sexual adventures are devoid of any form of intimacy: “I had
squeezed many penises before, at school. We stroked and rubbed and pinched each other all the time. It broke up the monotony of learning. But I had never kissed a man” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 17). Karim has his first sexual encounters with his best friend Jamila, but even their profound friendship does not help him towards an understanding of sex and its connection to love: “I learned nothing about sex, not the slightest thing about where and how and here and there, and I lost none of my fear of intimacy” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 52). And when Karim does make a choice to become intimate with someone, he makes it sound as if love is nothing more than putting forth a rational decision: “I had chosen Eleanor to fall in love with, and was making progress” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 172). Furthermore, love can only be very temporary according to Karim, an observation which leads him to believe that love is never heartfelt: “so there it was. Helen loved me futilely, and I loved Charlie futilely, and he loved Miss Patchouli futilely, and no doubt she loved some other fucker futilely” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 38).

2.6 Theatricality

2.6.1 Supporting the hybridity

Theatricality is an important theme in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, as Alamgir Hashmi remarks: “as the theatrical itself assumes a dimension of life, playing moves the plot, and searching for a character becomes both a structural and a symbolic device” (26). That Karim is an actor in the theatre world is in itself a structural device, since he is almost constantly on the look-out for characters to play and new traits to apply to them when he has found a character. His first job as an actor involves playing the part of Mowgli in an adaptation of *The Jungle Book*. But his role after that, in a play of
a more renowned director, is one he completely has to create himself. Thus he is appointed as a fellow scriptwriter and given more creative control in his job. Karim’s sexuality is proof of the fact that the search for a character can also be seen as a symbolic device. Karim was in need of several sex partners and lovers for the same reason that he appropriated to himself a diverse range of urban elements, all gleaned during his drifting through London. And this reason is that the hybrid nature of his identity desires a multitude of forms through which it can express itself. So if Karim ‘plays’ different roles, this can be called symbolical because it also reflects his hybrid nature.

That is why acting for Karim proves to be a purging activity. He can lose certain aspects of his identity in one role, thus preventing a clash with other, possibly paradoxical, elements of his self. Why is it again that these elements are paradoxical and not purely contradictory? Because these elements are forged in Bhabha’s interstices of different cultures, in the Third Space, where a completely new cultural affiliation is born (39). If the existence of the Third Space was generally accepted, and thus accessible to all those who desire this, then Karim might not need this theatricality. But now it helps him open himself up to the world: “until this moment I’d felt incapable of operating effectively in the world...my happiness and progress and education could depend on my own activity – as long as it was the right activity at the right time” (Kureishi, The Buddha 155). With this last condition Karim means that he can expose – through his acting – those thoughts which come bubbling up at any specific time. Karim’s attitude towards theatricality is so positive that he has trouble fitting in without it. This is illustrated in the following thought he has while watching his mother: “she reminded me of the real world. I wanted to shout at her: Take that world away!” (Kureishi, The Buddha 18). It is as if Karim always has to make sure that he
does not drop his guard, when he is in “the real world”. For his second play, Karim’s first idea was to base his character on Anwar. But because the other actors asked him to choose someone else, he creates Tariq: Karim’s view of Changez, his friend and Jamila’s husband. When he is alone and working on his character, he confides to the reader: “I felt more solid myself” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 217). Which proves that thanks to this creation of theatricality he can do “the right activity at the right time”. And thus, by emphasizing stagecraft and acting, the novel once more develops “the theme of self-transformation” (Stein 117).

2. 6. 2 A problematic theatricality

But it is not always clear whether Karim is being truthful or not. The impression one gets of Karim’s role playing is ambiguous at times, and one needs the right frame of mind to comprehend his decisions. It is for instance debatable that no one should side with what Jamila has to say about his performance in *Jungle Book*: “it was disgusting, the accent and the shit you had smeared over you. You were just pandering to prejudices... And clichés about Indians. And the accent – my God, how could you do it? I expect you’re ashamed, aren’t you?” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 157). Jamila’s outburst is very understandable if one looks at Karim’s compliance towards the director, Jeremy Shadwell. At first Shadwell is actually elated that Karim will play the role: “‘you’re right for him,’ he continued. ‘In fact, you are Mowgli. You’re dark-skinned, you’re small and wiry, and you’ll be sweet but wholesome in the costume. Not too pornographic, I hope. Certain critics will go for you’” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 142-43). But as the rehearsals are getting on, it turns out that Karim is not as “dark-skinned” as Shadwell would have liked. Shadwell decides that Karim should be covered with a brown cream so that there would be no doubt among audiences that this was an Indian boy. Problematic as well in this respect is Karim’s Orpington
accent. It is as if Shadwell is completely upset with Karim's bizarre mix of characteristics. Why does Karim comply with this "pandering to prejudices"? In his defence, it has to be said that Karim did care about the effect that his rendition of Mowgli would have. He definitely disagrees with Shadwell and knows that his ethnicity is but a construct – and not a fixed one – which is influenced by his place of residence, past, language, and culture (Hall, Cultural Identity and Diaspora 230). He also tried to persuade Shadwell not to pursue this farcical act with the brown make-up and the funny accent: "Jeremy’, I pleaded. ‘It's a political matter to me” (Kureishi, The Buddha 147). Since Shadwell ignores Karim’s pleading, Karim decides to act the part – most likely to keep his dream of becoming an actor alive – in as clichéd a manner as is desired of him. What then happens is either pure self-deception or a masterly example of perseverance which enables Karim to detach himself from the role he plays and turn inwards to his real self. Remembering having read a similar situation in a Stendhal novel, Karim “thought of Julien Sorel in The Red and the Black, dissimulating and silent for the sake of ambition, his pride often shattered, but beneath it all solid in his superiority” (Kureishi, The Buddha 146). Schoene believes that Karim is indeed able to “oscillate between the self and its manifold disguises” (120). An element which supports this statement is Karim's opposing attitude towards a director's advice: “he said: when in character, playing not-me, you have to be yourself. To make your not-self real you have to steal from your authentic self” (Kureishi, The Buddha 219).

Since Karim's theatricality is linked to his hybridity, it could be argued that he does not attach himself to all those different parts but instead temporarily squats in them. In contrast we can point at those people who do rely on their theatricality for their real identity. During one of his father's spiritual sessions it becomes apparent to
Karim that those middle class suburbanites who were craving for Haroon’s Eastern wisdom were filling the room with “a terrific amount of showing off” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 12). Their showing off is literally the only thing they have got to show for themselves. Since they think that the core of their identity is but a saddening void and thus feel that no authentic self has been bestowed upon them, they hold on to their ‘act’ as a last straw of illusionary self-definition. Another important difference with Karim is that these people care very much about how they are perceived; they want to remain in control of their representation. Karim on the other hand does not feel that he is being defined by how other people perceive him. Otherwise he would never comply with Shadwell’s wishes and play such a stereotypical, feigned character.

2. 6. 3 A myriad of names

A constant throughout the entire novel is that all major characters are given a myriad of names. If a name should tell something about the bearer’s identity then Karim is definitely the king of hybridity. The different names can be seen as different ‘roles’ that the characters play. Here follows an extensive, yet not exhaustive list of the names Karim Amir has been called: the Fire Eater, Creamy, Creamy Jeans, wog, blackie, shitface, curryface, and bum-banger (by his own father). Karim’s father could easily compete with his son in terms of hybrid names: Buddha, God, midget toreador, Harry, Daddio, Dad, future Guru of Chislehurst, and last but not least “The Buddha of Suburbia” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 133).
3 The illusion of a homogeneous identity

3.1 Essentialist notions of identity

It is easily detectable that Karim’s brother is entirely different from Karim himself. Through his actions Karim’s brother wants to free himself from the “condition of an ambivalent cultural attachment” (Stein xii). As Karim says, “my brother Amar, four years younger than me, called himself Allie to avoid racial trouble. He always went to bed as early as he could, taking with him fashion magazines like Vogue, Harper’s and Queen, and anything European he could lay his hands on” (Kureishi, The Buddha 19). Amar – or Allie, as this name better reflects his acquired or chosen identity – prefers to erase all aspects of his identity and appearance that bind him to a foreign culture and the role of outsider. It is difficult to judge or even condemn such a decision because Allie is merely craving for certainty, so that his feeling of belonging in England agrees with the perception and idea others have of him. Furthermore, his suppressed migrant characteristics brought him nothing but racial abuse. Without the act of expunction it would only appear to him as if he were trapped in the wrong body. One other example of Allie trying to expunge his Indianness are his meticulously executed efforts to keep his hair as lank as can be: “he was wearing a net to stop his hair going crazy when he slept” (Kureishi, The Buddha 4). The fact that Allie disposes of his Indian background also has a grave effect on the relationship with his father, Haroon. Not one time is it mentioned that the two of them engage in a shared activity or have a conversation, certainly not a heart-to-heart one.

When Zadie Smith remarks in White Teeth that “it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English”
(282), she could easily have been referring to Allie. And this in two paradoxical ways, firstly Allie could be the one who cannot admit this fact, and secondly he is also the one who perfected the art of being more English – as someone of mixed Indian-English heritage – than the English themselves. The paradoxical element lies in Allie’s denial of his Indian heritage and the failure to acknowledge that there exists a type of identity which stems not from merely one homogenous national culture. If he was not in denial about this, then he would know that he could be part of the group of people with a hybrid English-Indian identity and he would obviously agree with Smith’s contention. Smith contends that a state in which several homogenous cultures coexist without any form of interaction between them is simply not viable and therefore impossible. Six years before Smith used this idea as one of the main themes in her debut novel, the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha dedicated one of his influential books to the matter. He raises the subject in the beginning of *The Location of Culture*: “the very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities – as the grounds of cultural comparativism – are in a profound process of redefinition” (5).

This observation stands in contrast with how Karim’s mother thinks about him: “‘but you’re not an Indian. You’ve never been to India. You’d get diarrhoea the minute you stepped off that plane’” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 232). And when a short discussion between the two of them unfolds and Karim argues that he is at least partially Indian, his mother concludes the following: “‘What about me?’ Mum said ‘Who gave birth to you? You’re an Englishman, I’m glad to say’” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 232). The only way that his mother could be right is if it were generally accepted that there exist several ways of being English, and not just the narrow-
minded idea of the white English person with a genealogical tree that is firmly and
singularly rooted in English soil. Unfortunately for Karim, this idea is still widespread
in his mother’s country. Both Karim’s mother and Allie have an essentialist notion of
identity and ignore the heterogeneous nature that is a general characteristic of
identity.

3. 2 Mimicry and masks

3. 2. 1 Mimic man of the New World

From the time when he hesitantly set his first steps on English soil, slowly discovering
this foreign nation, Haroon wants to define his cultural self as unambiguously and
self-evidently as he had felt it when he still lived in India. He has come to England
together with his old friend Anwar to study, an objective both men forsake not long
after their arrival. Since this was the actual goal – obtaining a degree and then
returning to India – they were now forced to look for another purpose to make their
stay in England as meaningful as it could be. Anwar is the first who starts working as
he opens up a small grocery store, thereby making the statement that his residence
in England could go beyond the initial temporariness. In fact, he is already complying
to the Thatcherite philosophy of the self-made man. Haroon “in contrast, was going
nowhere. His family cut off his money when they discovered from a spy – Dr Lal –
that he was being called to the Bar only to drink several pints of rough stout and
brown ale wearing a silk bow-tie and a green waistcoat” (Kureishi, The Buddha 26).
His family had much rather see him being called to another bar, since they wanted
Haroon to become a lawyer. Dr Lal is the family’s friend and overseas contact in
whose London house Haroon and Anwar are staying the first couple of months. But
now that Anwar is making it on his own, Haroon realizes that he too has to make a decision. And when Anwar’s proud family arranges a marriage for their son with Princess Jeeta – who belongs to the Indian aristocracy and will come to live with Anwar in England –, Haroon firmly decides to follow his manly urges and scours the city’s jazz-clubs for a woman, an English woman.

Clearly Haroon has also made a decision, as he is not only trying to be less of an Indian man but also starts a relationship with Margaret, and begins working as a civil servant. Just as V. S. Naipaul states in The mimic men – through one of his characters – that “[w]e pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it” (146), Haroon also believes that his pretension of Englishness will be sufficient to find his place in England. Moore-Gilbert also contends that Haroon’s behaviour is “a form of mimicry”, because he “has never entirely effaced his origins. This suggests that the ‘Englishness’ he has espoused in public life is to some degree tactical” (132).

But Haroon feels lost and hardly has a social life in England worthy of that name. The daily routine of work – where he is presumably mocked behind his back, as he morosely remarks himself – and the coldness in the familial house are not the things he envisaged for his life in England. In order to explain why Haroon is not accepted in his guise of Englishness one of Bhabha’s ideas can be quoted: “the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in ‘normalizing’ the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms” (86). Haroon is not one of England’s “colonial subjects” but his mimicry does disturb the former Empire’s self-appropriative authority.
When Haroon distances himself from all his previous attempts at impersonating the ‘white kind of Englishness’, this also has unwanted consequences. Haroon leaves his wife, Margaret, basically because she is inextricably associated with his previous self. He feels bad because of the way he treated her, after “how much she’d given him, cared for him, and loved him” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 116). Haroon never mentions any English friends or colleagues at work who make him feel wanted, he hardly feels tolerated, in fact. So Margaret is the only person who opened her arms for him and loved him for the man he is, instead of shunning him for the colour of his skin. No wonder Haroon then “feel[s] like a criminal” and does not “want her to be alone” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 116-17), after Margaret has played her best part as a saviour figure for Haroon. Haroon is in the impasse that he is not able to turn his back on his miserable life as a ‘would-be but never could-be’ Englishman, without turning his back on Margaret.

One could argue that Allie’s behaviour is not that different from Haroon’s. Indeed Allie/Amar can also be defined as a mimic man, but there is one considerable disparity between father and son. Haroon is one of those men “who betray their coloured descent by some striking feature” (Freud 190) and therefore has problems inscribing himself in English societal life. Allie on the other hand has perfected the art of mimicry and is no longer perceived as someone of mixed origin. He succeeds where his father failed.

3. 2. 2. An Oriental mask

What we can infer from Haroon’s behaviour after approximately ten years in England is that his Anglicization is not that much of a success, since he is making a mental or spiritual return to the East – indeed, not just to his own Indian background – as Karim
remains: “I don’t know how it all started, but when I was ten or eleven he turned to Lieh Tzu, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu as if they’d never been read before, as if they’d been writing exclusively for him” (Kureishi, The Buddha 27). His own growth Haroon views in terms of reaching a newly created Asian identity, which is therefore his second rebirth in England. Bhabha’s remark that “[m]imicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask” (88) is a possible explanation for the fact that Haroon has to journey from one act of mimicry to another. Because there is no “presence” to fall back on after the mimicry has been left.

Haroon’s qualities as a guru, shared interests with Eva, and love for the Eastern wisdom all help him to embed himself in a culture that seems to have become interested in the Orient. Karim cannot understand why his father “was hissing his s’s and exaggerating his Indian accent” after “he’d spent years trying to be more of an Englishman” (Kureishi, The Buddha 21). He is equally surprised by the conspicuous manner in which his father is staging his recently acquired wisdom, and cannot help but keep seeing his father’s helplessness, for instance when he retorts after Eva declared that Haroon will show them (i.e. the spectators of one of Haroon’s séances) the Way, the Path: “Jesus Fucking Christ,’ I whispered to Charlie, remembering how Dad couldn’t even find his way to Beckenham” (Kureishi, The Buddha 13).

It is quite hilarious, in fact, how all the spectators marvel at Haroon’s spirituality, how he walks pensively around the room and declares the strangest things. The on-lookers are all convinced of the genuineness of his wisdom, and of how long he must have meditated to reach this state, but they do not know that all his ideas are taken “from his books on Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism, and Zen which he had bought at the Oriental bookshop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road”
It is obvious that the audience is deceived by Haroon, but he also deceives himself because he honestly affiliates himself to the cultural legacy which he gathered from a London bookshop. Stein notes that “Karim’s career resembles his father’s in that both are theatrical characters who ‘invent’ an ‘Asian’ personality for the consumption of their audience” (117). But the important difference is that Haroon is actually dependent on this invented personality for his own well-being. The séances are merely the catalyst which makes Haroon more convinced that he has finally found the right identity with which he can take his place in English society. This new identity is being formed because there was an “audience” which opened itself up to it. This idea can be paralleled with what Bhabha has to say about ‘the colonial’: “it is as if the very emergence of the ‘colonial’ is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself” (86). The former colonizer’s ideas on the exotic ‘Other’ represent Haroon’s being and Haroon complies to these ideas.

When Haroon leaves Margaret and is ready to move in with Eva he tells Karim the following: “forget it ... let’s take nothing, eh?” (Kureishi, The Buddha 91), which proves that Haroon definitely wants to make a fresh start with Eva. Karim makes the following remark on Eva and Haroon’s relationship: “a high-spirited egotism-à-deux? In their hands love seemed a narrow-eyed, exclusive, selfish bastard” (Kureishi, The Buddha 116). Both are dependent on each other to uphold their constructed and fragile identity. Clearly Eva stimulates Haroon’s plunge into his oddly brewed cocktail of Eastern mysticism. Likewise Eva loves to associate herself with Haroon’s background, as she deems it the perfect potion to strip herself of her suburban, pale skin. Hence the description of their relationship as a “high-spirited egotism-à-deux”.

Because of this boost in confidence that his rebirth has caused, Haroon quite proudly
remarks the following: “I have lived in the West for most of my life, and I will die here, yet I remain to all intents and purposes an Indian man. I will never be anything but an Indian” (Kureishi, The Buddha 263).

3. 2. 3 The contradictions prevail

An awkward situation occurs for Karim when he sneaks up on a couple that is in the midst of lovemaking, only to find out that it is his father and Eva. To make things worse he hears his father wailing ‘oh God, oh my God’. This prompts Karim to make the following clever observation which reveals Haroon’s contradictory mix of different cultures: “was I conceived like this, I wondered, in the suburban night air, to the wailing of Christian curses from the mouth of a renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist?” (Kureishi, The Buddha 16). Haroon may be convinced of the homogenous nature of one’s identity, still he cannot erase all the different influences inside him stemming from the East and the West. But Haroon himself is not aware of this because he mainly acts on instinct. It is a profoundly malcontent feeling that leads him away from his dull life as an Indian who works for the British Civil Service, and similarly it is a feeling of sudden joy at the discovery of Eva’s love for him – which was at first a love for him as an exoticized Indian – which leads Haroon to absorb Buddhism as if Gautama was his direct ancestor. So when he is asked what he is doing “it surprised him that he was expected to declare the pattern and intention behind it all in order that others could understand” (Kureishi, The Buddha 66).

Haroon has certain expectations of Karim and they all relate to Haroon’s hope that Karim will establish himself in England more easily than he did. For his own convenience, Haroon stays blind for the trouble and racism which Karim has to endure, he only thinks about Karim’s future as a respected doctor, or maybe a
respected actor. In fact it is not so much Haroon’s blindness but his naive belief that “the conditions [are] good for advancement” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 250), which convinces him that Karim will find his place in English society. Haroon upholds quite a few narrow-minded and prejudiced ideas, which he unleashes on his son. The reason behind this is that Haroon wants to protect Karim against being cornered and placed in a minority role, something which Haroon could hardly escape. He is for instance infuriated when he assumes that his own son is a homosexual: “I saw you, Karim. My God, you’re a bloody pure shitter! A bum-banger! My own son – how did it transpire?” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 18). It seems that for Haroon being a homosexual is problematic because of his Islamic background: “in his Muslim mind it was bad enough being a woman; being a man and denying your male sex was perverse and self-destructive” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 174). Haroon cannot grasp that Karim’s sexual activities do not define who he is. According to Haroon there is only one identity available for everyone, although he believes that you can change identities.

The fact that Haroon condemns Karim’s supposed homosexuality has everything to do with Haroon’s belief that this could cause a lot of trouble for Karim, and not with the fact that he dogmatically clings to Islam. Otherwise Haroon would not turn to other religions such as Buddhism and Taoism. The following quotation provides a fine example of how Haroon again attempts to safeguard his son from possible violence – racial abuse is what he must have in mind – and at the same time denounces his Muslim origins: “‘why go out with these Muslims?’ he said once, when I brought a Pakistani friend of Jamila’s home with me. ‘Why not?’ I asked. ‘Too many problems,’ he said imperiously” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 73).

Karim realizes that his father wants him to make it in England and become a man of distinction, succeeding where his father had failed: “it was as if he saw us as
having one life between us. I was the second half, an extension of him, and instead of complementing him I’d thrown shit all over him” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 110). But Karim is completely absorbed with his identity quest and even drops out of school because this no longer suits him: “there’d have to come a time when I broke the news to him that the education system and I had split up. It would break his immigrant heart, too. But the spirit of the age among the people I knew manifested itself as general drift and idleness” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 94). Karim points to the differences between his father and himself, whereas Haroon is convinced that both men are evolving towards a mature and stable identity: “and I like having you with me, boy. I love you very much. We’re growing up together, we are” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 22).

There are of course similarities between Haroon and Karim. Both men for instance are passing through novel and fascinating experiences, and “it wasn’t simply about taking drugs [for Karim] and getting laid [for both Karim and Haroon] – that was just a small part of it. It was the excitement of moving into a new world” (Amitava 125). Both men would also surely agree with Jay’s statement in Kureishi’s controversial novel *Intimacy*: ”how do I like to write? With a soft pencil and a hard dick – not the other way around” (25). Thus Karim and Haroon both have the adage – as does Jay – that life needs to be lived and not only analyzed, and this in a truthful and satisfactory manner.

3. 3 Change by degrees

An interesting comparison can be made between Haroon’s peregrinations and what Caryl Phillips has to say about the immigrant condition:
I do think it’s naive to come into a society and, along with your cardboard suitcase, bring a set of values you think society must somehow accommodate. Every migrant into a country thinks about that country’s patterns of behaviour, social mores. You have to think, okay these are the things that matter to this society and these are the benefits it can offer me; I’m going to challenge it to this point. That seems to me to be the story of everybody who passed through Ellis Island. You change by degrees. There’s a bit of give and play for any immigrant, because you’re coming into something that’s bigger than you. You have to take it into account. We all want Britain to be a wonderfully multiracial, multicultural, heterogeneous melting pot. But the fact is it isn’t. (qtd. in Jaggi 2000, 165)

Haroon did not “change by degrees” at all; after his arrival he frantically adjusted himself to the “patterns of behaviour” and the “social mores” of his new country. Unfortunately there was no “give and play” for him; he only discovered the “benefits” later on, when he met Eva. Even if Phillips contends that it is naive to bring your “set of values you think society must accommodate”, it is probably equally naive of Haroon to discard his “suitcase of values” from the moment he stepped off the boat or plane. Although a second-generation immigrant, Karim’s situation is more in accordance with Phillips’s exposé. He is also the perfect example that Britain is not a “heterogeneous melting pot”. The true melting pot hides itself in every individual separately. And that is where most people are mistaken according to Phillips: they think Britain is full of people with a distinct, clear-cut, and homogeneous identity, and that all these people coexist without their identities and personalities influencing one another. Maybe – and perhaps not that advantageous – that is what a melting pot for
most people means: an international dish with ingredients from all around the world, but no single taste that transfers to another one, all ingredients seemingly condemned to merely glance at each other. At least this is my interpretation of what Phillips means by this “melting pot” that Britain is not, evidently because it is in conformity with my idea of what a melting pot is not (“the international dish”) and what it actually is (the melting pot inside each individual, which is another way of referring to one’s hybrid nature). Most likely this is also what Phillips meant. But in his introduction to *Extravagant Strangers*, which he wrote three years before the publication of the interview from which the above quotation is taken, Phillips apparently uses the phrase ‘melting pot’ in a slightly different meaning: “this anthology is an attempt to illustrate what Defoe perceived all those years ago: that British society has always been a melting pot of diverse cultural influences, and her heterogeneous condition runs very deep” (xiv). It is not my intention to criticize Phillips, but merely to show how complex it can be to talk about hybridity.

4 Perception of the racial ‘Other’

The ambivalence and duality – insider versus outsider – which is detectable in Karim’s and other characters’ identity is also reflected in the way that these characters are perceived by the readers of the novel. No matter how small the amount of information that is given about a character, the reader will automatically form a rudimentary image of that person. The goal of such an action, which is obviously not restricted in its application and is also used in real life, is to simplify the world and its inhabitants and thus create a higher degree of comprehensibility. Regardless of the prejudicial nature of these stereotypical ideas or the use of
hackneyed clichés, the clarity and comprehensibility that is obtained through such stereotypical thinking is disputable – one could easily say problematic. An essential part – and proof of its erroneousness – of these rudimentarily formed ideas is the imposition of a label on someone. The act of branding someone with a label is an exceptionally stigmatizing act and makes it extremely difficult for the person who undergoes such an act to manifest traits of his or her identity which do not fit the label.

To exemplify the ambivalence that the reader experiences concerning the dualistic notion of insider versus outsider, we can return to Karim’s brother. Due to the opening paragraph, the reader may already sense that the distinction between indigenous and foreign will be a crucial one in the development of the novel. Therefore it is plausible that the reader will apply one of these opposing terms to characterise the people that inhabit Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, even if he has been alerted to the problematic nature of this distinction. It is the character of Karim’s brother who directly and inescapably challenges such dualistic thinking. Firstly, he is repeatedly referred to as Allie. Secondly, Allie only seems to be interested in cultural aspects that unambiguously stem from Europe. His specific interest lies in fashion, for which he seems to have an obsession. What he takes as his single guideline – his fashionmonger’s bible, so to speak – are quintessentially European fashion magazines. The trouble for the reader is that he or she knows that Allie is Karim’s brother and therefore a part of the progeny of a Pakistani man. This fact convinces the reader that he or she can arguably think of Allie in the role of an outsider, a foreigner. But unlike Karim, Allie’s name sounds entirely Western and so does his characterization. The branding of Allie as either an outsider or insider proves
to be problematic and the ambiguity that thus pervades the reader’s mind will slowly
eat away the traditional conceptions of identity which are based on dualistic terms.

Lest it be forgotten: it is worth pointing out that the true cause of Allie’s changes lies in Britain’s stance. As Caryl Phillips remarks: “the once great colonial power that is Britain has always sought to define her people, and by extension the nation itself, by identifying those who don’t belong. As a result, Britain has developed a vision of herself as a nation that is both culturally and ethnically homogeneous, and this vision has made it difficult for some Britons to feel that they have the right to participate fully in the main narrative of British life” (xiii). But those excluded Britons do feel equally part of Britain. Take for instance the moment when Karim tells about one of the dreams he had in his childhood. He was a big fan of football then and felt for quite some time that he “wanted to be the first Indian centre-forward to play for England” (Kureishi, The Buddha 43). This feeling of Karim is a typical ‘English lad’s dream’, and therefore shows that he – just like his brother – has a strong feeling of belonging in England. But unlike Allie, Karim does not abandon his Indian background. He is unmistakably aware of the predicament his condition brings with it – since he specifically says he wants to be the first Indian to play for the English football team – and does not forsake his father’s nationality.

Karim lives in a nation-state that watches him closely. What is more, “if the state binds in the name of the nation, conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, banishes” (Butler and Spivak 4-5). What Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak contend here is that it is problematic for someone like Karim to be a fully-fledged member of the English state because the idea of the state is built on notions of a nation in which Karim is not represented. It could even be argued that the idea of the nation is for the larger part
constructed out of ideas that are merely employed because they oppose those of the minority groups to which the state wants to prohibit entrance. This exclusion does not necessarily mean that these members of minority groups cannot physically enter the state. Take for instance the next quotation from Butler and Spivak: “it [the state] expels precisely through an exercise of power that depends upon barriers and prisons and, so, in the mode of a certain containment” (5). We can interpret the barriers as figurative barriers that ban people like Karim – who actually live inside the state – from all advantages which are granted to those of the majority group who created the idea of the state.

In his professional life, as a theatre actor, he is also constantly reminded of his Indian background. All of the characters he played are firmly rooted in the Asian continent. Also at the close of the novel he is cast to play an Asian character in a new soap opera. So with reason Stein remarks that “his career choices indicate that Karim being recognizably Asian impacts heavily upon his formation” (117). But ironically enough, Karim turns out to be not Indian enough for the directors as well as for the audience to sustain their prejudiced idea of the Indian.

5 Challenging the stereotypes

5.1 Internal differences

As young adults, Karim and Allie have a discussion about a play in which minority roles and the prejudgement of and racism towards people of colour is an important theme. The discussion shows that Allie has only become more rigid about this topic. Apparently he has found a way out and was able to escape from all the racial abuse.
Consequently he expects that it is fairly straightforward for others too to avoid being the victim of violence and ill-treatment. When Karim asks him, “Shouldn’t they – I mean, we – talk about it, Allie?”, Allie ignores the “we” and gives an answer that shows a complete lack of insight into the immigrant condition:

‘Talk about it? God, no.’ Clearly he was on to a subject he liked. ‘They should shut up and get on with their lives. At least blacks have a history of slavery. The Indians were kicked out of Uganda. There was reason for bitterness. But no one put people like you and me in camps, and no one will. We can’t be lumped in with them, thank God. We should be just as grateful we haven’t got white skin either. I don’t like the look of white skin [...] Let me say that we come from privilege. We can’t pretend we’re some kind of shitted-on oppressed people.’ (Kureishi, The Buddha 267-268)

Allie’s and Karim’s opposing views are but two elements of a wide spectrum of diverse opinions and lifestyles. In creating all these different voices “Kureishi’s work reminds one that Asian Britain is internally differentiated to the extent that there is no single community for him to be spokesman for” (Moore-Gilbert 19).

5. 2 The burden of representation

Kureishi also vigorously defends his right to write about anything. As Stein notes, he is not a “‘professional Pakistani’, nor a ‘professional Black Briton’, but merely a professional writer” (118-119). It is not because he is a black Briton – a term which refers to all people of colour in Britain – and embraced by many as a postcolonial
writer, that he should confine himself to writing merely about matters that unmistakably belong to the postcolonial field. Likewise, his characters should be scrutinized in the broadest of analyses. Kureishi as a writer can be compared to one of his characters, Nasser – the uncle of one of the two protagonists in Kureishi’s film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986). Nasser feels he has the right to evict a black tenant – and thus undermines the idea of solidarity among separate groups of Black Britons – from his apartment block because he regards himself not as a ‘professional Pakistani’ but as a ‘professional businessman’. Karim too regards himself as a professional actor, despite the persistence of others to cast him as a member of a specific “group to which [he is] supposed to belong [i.e. the social group of Asians living in Britain]” (Moore-Gilbert 18). In his heart Karim does not want to comply to these external pressures but ineluctably undergoes the “burden of representation” (Kobena Mercer qtd. in Moore-Gilbert 7).

5. 3 Pandering to prejudices

It is with great irony that Hanif Kureishi also panders to prejudices – just like the theatre directors he portrays – when he creates a pungent scent of Indian foods and spices that wafts through his writing. Whenever one of the characters is eating – and especially if it is Karim – the reader can practically smell the strictly Asian cuisine: with great appetite they consume hot kebabs with mango chutney, wrapped in chapati, together with onions and green chillis, or some keema, aloo, or nan. The irony is obvious because Kureishi frequently utilizes his pen as a refined tool to undermine prejudiced ideas or – if the thought is just too repulsive – to “smash it with a ‘ammer!” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 40). Through his poignant description of Karim,
“an Englishman born and bred” (Kureishi, The Buddha 3), Kureishi wants to open up as many eyes as possible and show them that “there must be a fresh way of seeing Britain and the choices it faces: and a new way of being British after all this time” (Kureishi, The Rainbow Sign 38).

That role-playing and the world of the theatre would become of great importance to Karim is something that was already clear from a young age onwards: when he was just a boy he “imagined to be on the stage of the Old Vic” (Kureishi, The Buddha 5), playing a grand part. Another interesting example, even if some might contend that this is a form of over-interpretation, is how Karim and his brother both played waiters at their aunt’s dinner parties when they were little. The crowd consists of nouveaux riches who owned a thriving business in accordance with the Thatcherite philosophy: “Allie and I loved running among this reeking mob, the air thick with aftershave and perfume...women pinched our cheeks” (Kureishi, The Buddha 42). This scene is reminiscent of the colonial era when Indian servants ran among the wealthy to serve and obey. Thus Karim is found here again playing a part – one that is connected to his Indian background. What in my opinion justifies this parallel between a colonial scene and the 1970s dinner party is that Kureishi most likely consciously drew on this connection, once more seemingly because he is pandering to the prejudicial conception of the subordinate ‘Other’. It is not because he wants to affiliate himself with the kind of writing that might be expected from an author with a non-English background, but because he wants to oppose these expectations. Kureishi shows that this colonial scene irrevocably belongs to the past. And to make sure the audience perceives the altered situation, he places Haroon at these dinner parties as someone who “liked to stand out like a juggler at a funeral”. “Among this reeking mob ... where lives were measured by money”, Haroon talked
about this materialistic age and how “greed and status, not the being and texture of things” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 42) were celebrated. Thus, *The Buddha of Suburbia* counts as an example of postethnic literature as defined by Stein: “the term postethnic literature characterizes writing that shows an awareness of the expectations that so-called ethnic writing faces [...] ‘postethnic’, then, does not try to transcend the ‘ethnic’. Instead, it disputes the confinements of the very category” (112).

Kureishi gives examples to try and nuance the image of the Indian who comes to England, preferably to destroy this image all together, since there are only individuals coming to England, instead of representatives of one type of Indian. Margaret too wants to readjust the image that the English have of “the swarms of Indian peasants who came to Britain in the 1950’s and 1960’s, and of whom it was said they were not familiar with cutlery and certainly not with toilets, since they squatted on the seats and shat from on high”. So Margaret likes to refer to Haroon’s aristocratic upbringing and boasts to people that his family is “higher than the Churchills” and that Haroon “went to school in a horse-drawn carriage” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 24). It is also pointed out to the reader – especially to that section of the readership which believes that the Indians left behind their exotic paradise out of mere curiosity about the west or thirst for money – that the homeland of the immigrant has a specific history of its own (and not just a colonial one): “There were also constant riots and demonstrations and Hindu-Muslim fighting. You’d find your Hindu friends and neighbours chanting obscenities outside your house” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 23). But Kureishi would not be his irreverent self, if he only attempted to change our stereotypical ideas into a more loving way of looking at the outsider/foreigner: “Chekhov was Dad’s favourite all-time writer, and he always said
Chekhov’s plays and stories reminded him of India. I never understood this until I realized he meant that his characters’ uselessness, indolence and longing were typical of the adults he knew when he was a child” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 114).

Even if the colonial era was over, the mentality among the British remains largely the same in the seventies and hardly anyone treats the newcomers with the respect they deserve. Haroon personally experiences that the dominating discourses of which Bhabha speaks still prevail, and that he is still being marginalized. No wonder then that Eva and her friends’ passionate interest in his supposed Indian background (a form of Orientalism as discussed by Edward Said in his influential study which bears the same name) revives him and procures that he will take on the role of Buddha of Suburbia. Bhabha meticulously dissected the mechanism of how cultural minorities are marginalized and with what kind of tools – sheer power – racism is being justified:

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the ‘content’ of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth.

(110-11)
7 Conclusion

Because *The Buddha of Suburbia* “ends with a strongly melancholic undercurrent, which flows against its characteristic optimism about the liberating potential of plural and partial identities” (Moore-Gilbert 204), one could conclude that Karim Amir’s efforts to become accepted as a “radically deconstructive presence” (Schoene 118) might be all in vain. Nevertheless there is a sparkle of hope detectable in the ending: “I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn’t always be that way” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 284). Kureishi leaves us with an open ending that can go either way, but given the evolution Karim has gone through one is inclined to believe in an optimistic future. Karim has undergone a significant transformation from a secondary school dropout towards a respected theatre and soap opera actor, along the way resisting several rigid social roles which were being forced upon him.

When Karim complains that much of the contemporary theatre is written by “Oxford-educated boys who never left the house” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 207) this could be an indirect critique of Kureishi on the lack of writers who write about what is really going on in England. Twenty years after the publication of his debut novel “Kureishi’s oeuvre is likely to have historic importance as one of the first substantial bodies of cultural work produced by a British-born descendant of the nation’s minorities of ‘New Commonwealth’ origin” (Moore-Gilbert 190). Kureishi’s own intention was to “contribute to a climate of ideas”:

You would flatter yourself if you thought you could change things by a film or a play or whatever, but perhaps you can contribute to a climate of ideas... It is important to ask questions about how we live sexually, how we live racially, what our relations are with each other emotionally.
Asking these questions seems to me to be the things that artists can do rather than change society in any specific way”. (qtd. in Susheila, Nasta 197)

“For them [e.g. Karim], maturity consists in accepting as an ethical principle the terminally polymorphous and unstable nature of selfhood” (Moore-Gilbert 130). The fact that Karim has consistently stayed loyal to his “polymorphous and unstable nature of selfhood” is once more evidence for the possibility of an affirmative submersion of the hybrid person into society. Besides the existence of a hybrid identity Kureishi makes his readership aware of the humanity of each of his characters, thereby heralding a plea for acceptance, acceptance of every man and woman:

I suddenly saw such humanity in his eyes, and in the way he tried to smile – such innocence in the way he wanted to understand me, and such possibility of pain, along with the implicit assumption that he wouldn’t be harmed – that I pulled away. [...] I thought about torture and gratuitous physical pain. How could it be possible to do such things when there’d be certain looks that would cry out to you from the human depths, making you feel so much pity you could weep for a year? (Kureishi The Buddha, 241).
Works Cited


