THE ACTOR OF SUBURBIA: IDENTITY AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION IN THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA

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Abstract: This essay studies the significance of acting and performing in relation to self-transformation and the search for an identity in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*. It uses Judith Butler’s discussions on moral responsibility and gender performances, in order to investigate how the characters negotiate their identities and draws on Edward Said’s discussion on Orientalism to establish how the novel uses stereotypes as a way of undermining stereotyping and Orientalist learning. It also draws on Erving Goffman’s discussion on stigmatised identities, in order to better understand how the characters cope with discriminatory behaviour, being treated as second-class citizens, due to either their social or ethnic background. Arguing that the novel creates a link between the theme of acting and the theme of identity, this paper takes a closer look at the performative aspects of the narration and how the concept of authenticity becomes a problematic influence on performances of identity. Furthermore, this essay examines how the novel portrays the impact of Orientalist learning on social behaviour in a post imperial society, the prejudices and discrimination against Eastern identities and how it has helped produce a stigma against immigrant culture and becomes a cause for identity crises, for several of the characters.

Keywords: *The Buddha of Suburbia*, postcolonialism, performativity, authenticity, stigma, Orientalism
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1. Introduction
Perhaps the most central theme of Hanif Kureishi’s debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) is the question of identity and belonging. Through its protagonist Karim, a young man without a clearly stated or defined identity, it demonstrates the struggle of finding a place in society for anyone who does not fit neatly into a single, already defined category or group. Furthermore it questions the very idea of this categorization in a world characterised by high mobility between cultures. The story of the novel stretches beyond the personal development of Karim, bringing into discussion the idea of Britain evolving and becoming a multicultural society and the concept of cultural identity as dynamic rather than static. Though published in 1990, the novel has perhaps never been more relevant with its portrayal of what it is like to live in a culturally diverse society and all the struggles and questions that go with it, than it is today. In an age of increased migration, where cultures meet, sometimes clash, like never before, the novel speaks to us today, as one of our biggest challenges ahead will be to create multicultural communities that embrace a variety of traditions and value systems without being torn apart by conflicts.

The search for and creation of identity and the theme of self-transformation is perhaps most visibly realised in Karim’s ambition to become an actor, which I would argue becomes an extension of his wish to step in and out of roles and move between categories and identities. Acting becomes a way for Karim to transform himself, take on new identities and even try them out on an audience. However, Karim is not the only one who tries on different roles. Many of the other characters change their identity, basing it on a ‘performance’, as well, although in a slightly less literal sense; not everyone is taking their performance to the stage like Karim. Emerging more and more as a theme in itself, acting becomes a way for the characters to negotiate who they are, their identity, in their ‘new’ surroundings.

The aim of this study is to explore the symbolism and significance of acting in relation to self-transformation and the search for identity in the novel, primarily by focusing on how the theme of acting relates to some of the main characters and the narration of the novel.

Theory and Method
Just as *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a story about seeking identity, it is also about acting and performing, sometimes suggesting parallels between these concepts. In *Gender Trouble*
Judith Butler discusses the constructed nature of identity, gender identity in particular, seeing gender as a type of performance. Gender is not a fact in itself, but is created in the repeated performance of it, explains Butler (185). I will apply this understanding of gender to the concept of race in my essay when I explore the use of acting and performativity in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and how race and national identity become performative acts in the novel.

I will also make use of Butler’s remarks on drag performance, of which Butler says: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (*Gender Trouble* 187, italics in original). By playing with the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed, drag makes visible the socially constructed nature of gender and shows that naturalised or essentialist gender identities do not exist. The gendered body is performative, meaning that gender only exists in the enactment of it. Gender has no ontological status. It is socially constructed, a fabrication. Still, through the normalisation of this fabrication, presenting gender as natural, an objective truth, gender gains power over the individual’s performance of identity, since not subscribing to the norm can be a cause for discredit or exclusion. Based on no more (no less) than a norm, gender is therefore a performance without an original. Just like gender could be seen as a performance, an imitation, without an original, so could race in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The novel reveals the myth of ‘authenticity’, having an authentic, i.e. true or interior, racial identity, how race is also constructed in the performance of it and that there are no essentialist or naturalised racial identities. It also gives an understanding of the probable distress involved in not subscribing to a normative role. The concept of authenticity becomes problematic for the characters as it not only reinforces the perception of cultural identity as something fixed and static, but also, as Yu-cheng notes, forces the characters into stereotyped identities, presumed to be ‘authentic’ (1996:8). I will argue that the novel creates its own version of drag performance, revealing the imitative structure of race and fabrication of racial identity.

Where the idea of an authentic Oriental or Eastern identity comes from is well elaborated in *Orientalism* by Edward Said, which has become a very important influence on postcolonial studies. Published in 1978, *Orientalism* discusses the history of Western cultural imperialism over the East and its repercussions on the relationship between West and East, e.g. how Orientalism has led to a process of mystification of Eastern culture, reducing the
Orient to a few, often negative, characteristics and creating a binary structured discourse on culture that focuses on differences rather than similarities, an ‘us and them’ kind of approach. Said shows the knowledge power implications of Orientalism on the West-East relationship, where producing knowledge on the Orient has become a process of creating and controlling the Orient. Said’s arguments are supported in *The Buddha of Suburbia* where the reader witnesses how Orientalism continues to influence cultural and political perspectives and remains present even in post imperial societies. In my study of the characters I will incorporate Said’s discussion on stereotypes produced by Orientalists that appear in the novel as well, such as the wise guru and the exotic Indian boy, to examine how the stereotypes in the novel work to undermine and question stereotyping. In an essay Anna Wille explores the humorous strategies of mimicry and Orientalist representations in the novel and how these work to undermine Orientalist learning. However, she does not go deeper into the humorous or undermining effect of the narration. Therefore, I would like to explore further the way in which Karim’s narration undermines these Orientalist representations, since these not only provide comic relief but comment on the themes of the novel as well, making the critique of Orientalist ideas more apparent.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* criticises the binary structured discourse on culture, put forward by Orientalists, because of its tendency to segregate people, and cultures, divide them into categories and increase tension and prejudice toward other cultures. Sociologist Erving Goffman has studied the process of categorisation that takes place when humans interact and how prejudices and preconceived ideas about other groups then turn into a stigmatising process. In his book *Stigma* (1963), Goffman elaborates on the idea of stigma and what it is like to be a stigmatised person, the creation of identity and the options of self-presentation for those who are met with hostility and prejudiced attitudes. I think Goffman’s definition of stigma as “an undesired differentness” (15), undesired in the sense that it deviates from certain expectations or norms and therefore is used (intentionally or unintentionally) as an excuse for discriminatory behaviour by others, could also be applied to the situation of Karim and the other characters who all experience a lack of social acceptance, in their case, due to their ethnic background. Goffman’s research on how people deal with having stigmatised identities, how they present themselves to others and how they view themselves in relation to the stigma against them could, I think, inform my discussion of how the characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* deal with their differentness, their identities and search for acceptance.
Goffman’s research, which relies extensively on case studies and autobiographic material, shows how difficult it is to break down stigmas, partly because they often become internalised, but mostly because they are based on norms, and prejudices, deeply ingrained in society. He also gives many examples of how individuals have dealt with being stigmatised, which sometimes include individuals feeling the need to change their identity, not completely unlike the characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. In my analysis I will explore the idea of acting as a way of coping with a stigma and creating an identity.

In my reading of *The Buddha of Suburbia* I will examine the narration of the story as it suggests a level of self-reflexion and self-consciousness in Karim and could hint at a difference in how and why Karim and the other characters take on roles and change. I will examine how the narration is used to further undermine and mock the Orientalist stereotypes presented in the novel. Some attention will be paid to the characterization of some of the main characters in order to compare them to each other and how they use acting and create an identity for themselves, perhaps one that is more socially acceptable. The fact that Karim acts as both the main character and the narrator of the story will be important to keep in mind when drawing conclusions on or discussing the characters, or comparing other characters to Karim, since it sets him apart from the others from the very start. The narration is also interesting in relation to the theme of acting as the narration itself could be seen as a kind of performance.

**Previous Research**

Much of what has been written on *The Buddha of Suburbia* has discussed how the novel deals with ethnic and national identity, through a postcolonial approach. An example of this is Berthold Schoene’s article in which he examines *The Buddha of Suburbia* as an example of a British identity crisis reflected in literature, resulted from the impact of postcolonial, post imperial Britain. Berthold concludes that the Anglo-British are “suffering from severe cultural dislocation” (112), a non-identity, after losing their superiority as colonizers, which tends to increase discriminatory stereotyping and alienation of immigrants as racism and Orientalism becomes a way to reclaim some cultural ‘superiority’. He also states that *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows the problems with a binary structured discourse about ethnic identity and the problems facing those searching for an identity, not least Karim and his ‘undefined’ identity, in a prejudice-ridden culture. Stressing the importance of individual freedom, the novel tries
to make room for a mixture between culture and ethnicity. Similarly, Shao-Ming Kung, in an analysis of Hanif Kureishi’s *The Black Album* (1995), emphasises the need for rethinking British national identity as “being born in Britain does not result naturally in belonging” (124). Assessing that the effects of racial discourse are still present among white Britons as well as assimilated immigrants, Kung asserts that Kureishi demonstrates how “the experience of racism and the barriers for inclusion in British national identity” (118) drive characters to seek a new identity, exemplified in *The Black Album* by Muslim characters “seeking refuge in the collective identity of Islam” (118). According to Kung, Kureishi’s writing suggests that it is the hostility and racism that young British Muslims are faced with that becomes a main cause for violent fundamentalism and that there is a clear message about the need for English national community to become more tolerant and multiethnic.

The discussion about how Kureishi’s characters negotiate their identity has also included the concept of authenticity. In an essay, Lee Yu-cheng explores the import of the ideal of authenticity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, arguing that authenticity becomes a political tool that is used to confine and marginalise minorities, and therefore a highly subversive concept in the novel. Yu-cheng also argues that the novel challenges the importance of authenticity through hybridisation, mediation between cultures, and Karim’s new, ambivalent, perspective. While some characters are kept from defining their sense of being, others use authenticity as a form of reassurance for their identities, and in some cases an excuse to turn identities into commodities. How the characters of the novel commodify their identities has been studied by Berkem Gürenci Saglam, taking a closer look at the portrayal of hippiedom and punk in London in the novel and how these movements, despite their best efforts to change the world, remain on the margin. Saglam notes how some characters take a very superficial approach to these movements and by changing appearances attain great success in their careers. According to Saglam, the characters’ eagerness to find a niche for themselves only results in shallow and commodified versions of bigger movements, distinguishingly artificial. This ‘insincerity’ could then be seen as a way of demonstrating the unstableness of ‘identity’ and how self-image is created.

The negotiation of self-image in postcolonial works is further analysed by Anna Wille who examines the novel in relation to Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry, seeing the novel as an example of fiction’s powerful potential of subverting the limiting and essentialist discourse on ‘the other’ through humour. Wille argues that mimicry is a threat to the
colonialist since it introduces ambivalence and is therefore a reminder of the unstableness of the colonialist’s identity. Turning white Britons’ fear of immigrants’ cultures into humour, Kureishi is “subverting colonialism by making it strange” (Wille 458, italics in original) and he is using mimicry and humour to upset binary structures and rearticulate the concept of identity.

**Structure**

In my study on the relationship between the theme of acting and the search for an identity and self-transformation I will begin with a discussion on the narration of the novel, since previous discussions on acting have not included or made a link to the narration before and I want to investigate the performative aspects of the narration. In the following chapter, I will examine the concept of authenticity in the novel, to study how authenticity affects the formation of identity, both on stage and off stage. I will then discuss how the process of stigmatisation, being faced with prejudiced attitudes and opinions, shapes the acts of identity in the novel. In order to make sense of the performances the characters present, it is important to understand the conditions under which they create their identity. Finally, in my conclusion, I will review my discussion and reflect on how my findings relate to my thesis.
2. An Account of the Narrator

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) Judith Butler asks what it means to lead an ethical life and interrogates the problems of morality and responsibility, focusing mainly on the individual and his or her relationship with society. Butler asserts the difficulty in answering to one’s responsibility, giving an account of oneself, due to the limits of a person’s self-knowledge. A person is also the result of his or her time and surroundings. Hence, giving an account of oneself includes giving an account of the social conditions that help produce the subject in the first place. Arguing that the transparent, rational, and continuous ethical subject is an impossible construct that denies what it is to be human, Butler offers a critique of the moral self. We can know ourselves only incompletely, and only in relation to a broader social world that has always preceded us and already shaped us in ways we cannot grasp.

Although the account we give of ourselves is limited by our inability to fully know ourselves and our identity is influenced by circumstances we cannot rule over or separate ourselves from, there is still possibility for self-reflection. When we give an account of ourselves to produce a narration of our actions and ourselves we are also, through our narration, enacting the self we are trying to describe. That the account we give of ourselves becomes a kind of performance of our identity is important in the case of Karim, whose account of himself makes up the novel.

The novel opens with Karim presenting himself. He is talking to someone: “My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bread, almost” (3). By introducing himself in this manner, he is giving the reader the sense that he is trying to do more than just recount events, he is giving an account of himself as well. He also shares the fact that he is often seen as a “funny kind of Englishman” by other people, “a new breed” (3), but claims he does not care. Nor does he elaborate on what it means to be an Englishman born and bread almost. Already, Karim has introduced a contradiction, or at least an uncertainty regarding his identity. This ambiguity of “belonging and not” (3) is a vital part of the character of Karim, especially his seemingly untroubled attitude toward the situation. He never really expresses an interest in his mixed background. After his initial introduction he turns to the audience a number of times, to remind us that he is speaking to someone: “I can tell you […]” (68), “I bet […]” (104) and “To tell the truth […]” (140). And after recounting his father’s sudden change in behaviour he asks: “Why?” (21), again to remind the reader of this relationship.
The narration is also where Karim makes his feelings clear. He expresses his disgust over Shadwell’s discriminating actions, which he cannot fully express to the other characters without seriously jeopardising his own career: “What could I say? I couldn’t win. I knew he’d hate me for it” (140). He is turning to the reader to explain himself. There are times when Karim’s narration takes an even more confessional tone. At Anwar’s funeral, for example, Karim expresses a certain sadness and regret over not having been connected more to his Indian roots in the past:

But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in some ways 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 (212)

By admitting these feelings, Karim shows that his relation towards his British and Indian roots, how he negotiates his place in society, his ambiguous identity, is maybe not as uncomplicated as the reader might think. There is an interesting contradiction in how Karim talks about the Indian people at the funeral. While he regrets being so detached from them and recognises the Indians as his people, in some ways, he still keeps calling them “strange creatures”, indicating very little recognition on his part. However, as Butler points out, this lack of transparency is part of the human condition and in an account of the self, humans are unlikely to produce an account that is completely rational and consistent, at all times. In a way, Karim’s ‘inconsistency’, going back and forth, is what makes him human.

Karim also takes advantage of the opportunity to add some of his flair for the dramatic and his sense of humour to the story, here by use of hyperbole: “It took me several months to get ready: I changed my entire outfit three times” (6). And after his crush at the time, Charlie, criticises the outfit he has picked with such careful planning he expresses his displeasure: “I contemplated myself and my wardrobe with loathing, and would willingly have urinated over every garment” (17). He also enjoys the creativity of coming up with his own nicknames for the people around him, calling his slightly alcoholised aunt Jean and her husband Ted “Gin and Tonic” (33), Changez, the bubble-head, “Bubble” (99), Shadwell, the insufferable director, “Shitwell” (148) but also Shagbaldy (150), “Shadshit”, “Shotbold” and “Shit-volumes” (165) and Haroon “Daddio” (31), “God” (32) and “Buddha” (32). The nicknames, in particular, are interesting because aside from being expressions of Karim’s wit or natural
inclination for drama, they reveal a rebellious, more critical, side of Karim, contradicting his friend Jamila’s assessment that he has “no morality” (157).

There is a balance between the comedy in Karim’s ironic tone, the use of hyperbole, the nicknames, the odd remarks, and the moments where Karim is more vulnerable, where the depth and complexity of his character are striking. For Karim the narration becomes a way of negotiating identity. As a person with a mixed background Karim belongs to more than one culture at once and rather than choosing one before the other, he keeps connections to them both. By living this way, able to move between cultures and traditions, he is giving a glimpse of the kind of mindset that is necessary in order to create a functioning multicultural community; an openness, a willingness to include and incorporate many traditions and perspectives. And in those situations where he is forced to comply with discrimination, where Karim’s actions are no longer in accordance with his sense of moral, his narration shows where his true heart lies. In telling his story, Karim gives an account of himself, he is explaining his actions and who he is. He is also giving an account of his surroundings. With his perspective as a person of mixed background, he explains what it is like to grow up in the suburbs of London and the kind of norms and prejudices that are part of this community. As a narrator Karim refuses to alienate himself from either culture and become some sort of ‘other’. While Karim’s testimony could be seen as his (and possibly Kureishi’s) way of answering some of the abuse that immigrants and people with mixed ethnic background have faced, rather than ‘writing back’ at English society, he is ‘writing from’ English society, being ‘born and bred’ in England. But even as Karim challenges prejudiced attitudes and undermines old authorities, such as Orientalism, and despite being content with who he is himself, he still will not escape other people’s preconceived notions, assumptions and prejudices about who he should be. The issues Karim is fighting against are not limited to an individual level, but form a power structure that shapes whole communities.
3. Undermining Authenticity

Confining Identity

Many of the novel’s characters are striving for authenticity as a form of validation. However, the concept of authenticity soon becomes problematic as it is used as an excuse for essentialism and even a strategy of confinement of identity, stereotyping minorities and ensuring continued marginalisation of minorities, as Yu-cheng concludes in an article, exploring the import of the ideal of authenticity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Although I agree with Yu-cheng that Karim has a different disposition and does not himself seek to be authentic, i.e. true to any singular identity, I do not agree with the assessment that he is free from this notion of authenticity (Yu-cheng 2-3), as he too is forced into portraying a stereotype in a play. Being content with an ambivalent identity, Karim does not seek to affirm himself and therefore feels no need to be authentically one thing or another. Still he does not escape this demand for authenticity in his role as Mowgli in Shadwell’s production of *The Jungle Book*. As explained by Shadwell, Karim is not cast for his experience but for his authenticity, “‘You’re just 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’” (142-143). The monologue Karim has prepared for the audition is soon forgotten. All that matters to Shadwell is Karim’s appearance and the ‘authenticity’ it will bring to his production.

In order to make Karim’s performance as authentic as possible, Shadwell, after deciding Karim is not dark enough after all, decides to cover Karim in a dark brown cream to make him look even darker. He also forces Karim to adopt an Indian accent, since he feels strongly that Karim should have “an authentic accent” (147). There is to be no doubt about the authenticity of Shadwell’s Mowgli. But the authenticity Shadwell is looking for comes from a stereotype of the Indian boy; dark, exotic, dressed in nothing but a linen cloth and speaking with an Indian accent. Authenticity seems to be an excuse for continued stereotyping. It is also a way of controlling the image of the Oriental.

Pyke, another director, is also interested in creating performances and characters that are compelling and believable, claiming that in order to “be someone else successfully you must be yourself” (220). In a performance you are trying to convince people that you are someone else, not yourself, and to do this successfully you need to be yourself. He then asks his group of actors to take inspiration from someone in their lives, to base their character on.
Karim initially wants to portray Charlie but here Pyke interrupts. He wants Karim to pick one of his people, someone black. Again, Karim’s authenticity as actor has to come from his Indian roots, which in reality, as the reader knows, only make up one part of his identity that he has related quite little with in the past. Furthermore, the control of the image of the Oriental is again at the hands of the Westerner, as stated by Said: “From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist’s work” (283) In the play, it is not for Karim to express his identity or ethnic background. It is the director who decides what passes for an Eastern, or ‘black’, identity. Which apparently includes Karim, who is deemed “officially ‘black’”, despite him being “more beige than anything” (167).

It becomes very ironic how Karim is forced to take on all these attributes that feel so strange to him, and step away from what feels close to him, in order to be authentic. After staying away from labels for so long, he is forced to fit the mould. To be as true as possible as an actor he has to become someone else completely, all the while his co-actors and directors think he is tapping into his very core. Every step towards what other people expect him to be is a step further away from who he really is. It is fair to say that Karim is a performer, with that in mind. In a way, Karim’s performance becomes a performance of Orientalist ideas, where he embodies the stereotypes and prejudices he is faced with in his everyday life. At least for the reader, who knows Karim and the distinction between his identity and the performance of identity he gives on stage.

There is a moment when Karim lets the audience of the theatre see the invention behind his performance as Mowgli. “Yet the play did good business, especially with schools, and I started to relax on stage, and to enjoy acting. I sent up the accent and made the audience laugh by suddenly relapsing into cockney at odd times. ‘Leave it out, Bagheera,’ I’d say” (158). By breaking his accent, Karim not only regains some creative control, he also shows the falsity of his role. For a brief moment, he makes the audience laugh, not at an ‘Indian boy’, but at the dressing up as an ‘Indian boy’. Similar to the effect of drag performances discussed by Butler in Gender Trouble, Karim reveals the imitative structure and contingency of race, through his performance of it.

Another case where authenticity becomes an excuse for stereotyping is that of Haroon, Karim’s father. Haroon, who often tends to take an essentialist view on ethnicity and culture,
is firm in his assertion that he is an Indian man, as he tells a journalist: “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 Indian” (263). Haroon believes his ‘Indianness’ has remained unchanged within him over the years he has lived as an immigrant in Britain. Nothing will change his essentially Indian identity, which remains authentic. Once again authenticity proves to be a limiting concept in discussions about identity, since it restricts the individual’s freedom to express more than one aspect of his or her identity. Haroon is determined to be true to his Indian background, assuming that if he were to start calling himself ‘English’ this would threaten his ‘Indianness’, it would make him less authentic. Nevertheless, it is Haroon who demonstrates one of the most radical changes in identity as he shifts from his Muslim upbringing in order to become a type of guru, leading meditation and yoga sessions.

**The Illusion of Authenticity**

The presence of Haroon in the story also further demonstrates, and makes fun of, the imitative structure and fictional nature of race. Because what Haroon’s English followers do not know about his innate wisdom and spirituality is that it is based on ideas he has found whilst living in the suburbs of London, as Karim likes to point out: “I ran and fetched Dad’s preferred yoga book – *Yoga for Women*, with pictures of healthy women in black leotards – from among his other books on Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism and Zen which he had bought at the Oriental bookshop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road” (5, italics in original). What Haroon’s audience finds so exotic and authentic about him is really just an enactment of a stereotype, the result of Orientalist conceptions of Eastern identity. It is partly Haroon’s overly exaggerated performance of his new role, and Karim’s many comments poking hole in Haroon’s new found spirituality that makes the ridiculousness of the situation undeniable. As ridiculous as Haroon’s performance may be, it again demonstrates the falsity of the notion of essentialist, natural, authentic, racial identity, through the power of parody.

Like Haroon, Charlie, the son of Haroon’s lover Eva, creates a new identity for himself, using punk in order to attain success in the music industry. As Saglam notes, Charlie’s version of punk earns him fame and success, as he hides his suburban middle-class background and builds his brand on his appearance and the assumptions other people make based on that appearance. Having already gone through a hippie phase and a glam, silver-
haired, phase, Charlie’s take on punk is simplified and superficial, based mainly on his clothes and physical appearance. Only Karim seems to detect how artificial Charlie’s punk persona is: “He was brilliant: he’d assembled the right elements. It was a wonderful trick and disguise. The one flaw, I giggled to myself, was his milky and healthy white teeth, which, to me, betrayed everything else” (154). When Charlie takes his punk act to New York he sees the opportunity to become even more ‘original’ and acquires a cockney accent, which amuses Karim whose first memory of Charlie is Charlie at school, crying after being teased for his talking so posh. Now Charlie is not only cashing in on punk culture but on his ‘Englishness’ too, as Karim notes: “He was selling Englishness, and getting a lot of money for it” (247). Through the characters of Haroon and Charlie the novel shows how superficial and constructed these identity markers can be. It undermines the ideal of authenticity and makes fun of those who seek it, whether it be in others or themselves.

While making fun of the bizarre way characters act in pursuit of authenticity and how characters change identities at the same rate most people change clothes, coming home one day from work having suddenly “taken up religion” (3), the message about the danger of authenticity in the novel is clear. In the novel the characters are obsessed with having a genuine identity, an identity that is undisputable and unmistakable. It seems that what makes an identity authentic is often determined by how easily it is perceived. To be authentic is the ability to be one thing and one thing only, to remain untouched or uninfluenced. Authenticity, then, always calls for more ways of separating and distinguishing one person, or culture, from another. It does not allow for inclusion or change. It becomes a cultural straitjacket that limits how the characters think about their identity, since it does not allow for negotiation. What the characters fail to see in their search for authenticity is that the role of ‘a typical Indian’ or ‘typical Englishman’ is not an objective truth, but a social construction, a stereotype, that only exists in the enactment of it.

Considering Butler’s statements about gender as socially constructed and only existing in the performance of it, thus becoming a performative act, we could argue that the same goes for race in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, where the performative nature of national and ethnic identity is revealed. What is asserted as ‘East’ and what is asserted as ‘West’ is created in people’s minds, as stated by Said: “neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other” (xvii). Authenticity also becomes dividing, causing people to
categorise and put themselves, and others, into different groups. This categorisation is also a key part of the process of stigmatisation, which seeks to establish a norm by targeting those who are different and devalue them because of their ‘difference’.
4. Stigmatisation of Identities

Stigmatising Orientalism

It is unquestionable that Karim experiences discrimination because of the prejudices others have about his ethnic background. He comments on the fact that ethnicity and the status of ‘immigrant’ becomes a barrier for acceptance for many of the characters: “we were supposed to be English but to the English we were always wogs, and nigs, and pakis and the rest of it” (53). The concept of ‘Englishness’ is still too narrow to include different cultures and ethnicities. No matter how hard the characters try, they will never be completely assimilated into society unless the English national community becomes more tolerant. Beyond the limits that the concept of authenticity puts on the expressions of identities of the characters, *The Buddha of Suburbia* shows how Orientalist ‘othering’ is still interfering with the acceptance of certain groups and ethnicities as equals in society, how they are continually viewed and treated differently. As put forward by Said in *Orientalism*: “An Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man” (231). In his career as an actor, Karim seems to be treated as an ‘Indian’ first and an actor second. His skin colour seems to somehow override any other impression he might make on the people he meets, which shows that there is still a process of alienation and Orientalist ‘othering’. This is part of the process of stigmatisation, according to Goffman. When a person is stigmatised the attribute that is seen as negative tends to be given an unnecessary amount of attention and the individual is somehow reduced to one quality, his or her deviation from the norm.

This alienating process is deeply felt by Haroon, who immigrated to England as a student and settled down there after meeting his wife Margaret. “‘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’” (27) Haroon is clearly disappointed and irritated by the narrow-mindedness of the British community. After spending his entire adult life trying to fit in, working as a Civil Service clerk, carrying a blue dictionary in his suitcase to make sure he learns a new word every day, he realises that as much as he may try to assimilate to British society, he will never be accepted as a fully-fledged member, an equal. He will always be considered to be different. So Haroon gives up trying to be ‘English’ and decides to embrace his differentness and become as ‘Indian’ as possible. In his analysis of another novel by Kureishi, Kung concludes that it is the experience of racism and the rejection of other
ethnicities in British society that leads Muslim characters to put aside their assimilation and make a spiritual return to Islam. In The Black Album the characters turn to the collective identity of Islam, even seeking refuge in Islamic fundamentalism to find new identities. In The Buddha of Suburbia Haroon makes a spiritual return to India and takes on the stereotype of ‘Indian guru’. Attempting to make his ‘Indianness’ work in his favour Haroon takes on the role of spiritual leader, an Indian guru. “He was speaking slowly, in a deeper voice than usual, as if he were addressing a crowd. He was hissing his s’s and exaggerating his Indian accent. He’d spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting it back in spadeloads [sic]” (21). But as Karim points out, it is an ‘Indianness’ created from ideas Haroon has found in London bookshops. He is making a claim on the exoticism that others have projected onto his identity since his arrival in England. Rather than embracing his ‘Indianness’ he is embracing a stereotype.

The prejudice attitudes against people with a non-white ethnicity could also explain why Changez, upon his arrival, is so keen to distance himself from other immigrants. As Karim notes, Changez “would be abusing any Pakistanis and Indians he saw in the street” (210):

‘Look at that low-class person’, he’d say in a loud voice, stopping and pointing out one of his fellow countrymen – perhaps a waiter hurrying to work or an old man ambling to the day centre, or especially a group of Sikhs going to visit their accountant. ‘Yes, they have souls, but the reason there is this bad racialism is because they are so dirty, so rough-looking, so bad-mannered. And they are wearing such strange clothes for the Englishman, turbans and all. To be accepted they must take up the English ways and forget their filthy villages! They must decide to be either here or there. Look how much here I am! And why doesn’t that bugger over there look the Englishman in the eye! No wonder the Englishman will hit him!’ (210)

Changez is trying to assimilate, to become English, and knows that being an immigrant will contradict this in a society that divides people into groups and rarely allows them to be part of more than one group at the same time. He wants to avoid being labelled as an immigrant and thus become part of a minority that is faced with hostility and prejudices. By looking down on immigrants in the street he is taking part in the tradition of hostility against other cultures, hoping his loyalty, his support of this tradition, will make him less of a target of discrimination and part of the dominant group instead. He calls other immigrants “they”, to indicate that he is not part of this group and partly blames them for whatever abuse they might suffer. Meanwhile, much like Haroon who tried discussing Byron in pubs when he first
arrived, Changez is eager to bond with the English over a keen interest in their literature and what he considers to be the classics, “‘P.G. Wodehouse and Conan Doyle for me!’” (83), and cricket of course: “[…] I have brought my own binoculars”’ (83).

Although it manifests slightly differently in Haroon and Changez, both characters have internalised the Orientalism they have been faced with. Changez’s need to prove himself as an Englishman leads him to verbally attack other immigrants and their cultures. It seems important to him not to be associated with immigrants, or rather the prejudiced image people have of immigrants. Haroon who is tired of being rejected and excluded, takes on the role of being ‘different’ and makes every effort to become the ‘exotic Indian’ people expect him to be. But by exoticising himself, Haroon is conforming to the old prejudices about Eastern identity that have turned into normative attitudes. By reproducing a stereotype Haroon makes sure that the norm, and the subsequent abuse against minorities, remains unthreatened, just as Changez’s behaviour allows for continued discrimination against minorities. Positioning themselves and their culture as inferior, they are trying to fit in by not upsetting the power balance.

Karim has not internalised the norm. He does not let other people’s perception of who he is affect his self-image. Even though he is constantly put in categories by others, even though others keep expressing a need to place him within a group, Karim does not. He does not choose one influence over another. The only time he is confined to a stereotype is in his career as an actor, when he decides to bide his time in the hope of better things coming along in the future. Part of the reason why Karim was longing for London in the first place was the hope to escape some of the racism he has had to deal with growing up in the suburbs. He hopes that he will not stand out as much in London: “there were thousands of black people everywhere, so I wouldn’t feel exposed” (121). At the end of the novel, Karim talks about living more fully, expresses a certain optimism toward his future: “I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn’t always be that way” (284). Maybe this is a signal that Karim will be more free, even as an actor.

**The Stigma of the Suburbs**

There is also a sense that the suburban ‘white’ community is having an identity crisis of its own. Charlie and Eva are also looking for new identities. According to Schoene, this is why Eva has taken such an interest in ‘the Orient’ and why Charlie changes his image. Eva is not
at all shy about her enthusiasm for Karim when they meet: “Then, holding me at arm’s length as if I were a coat she was about to try on, she looked me all over and said, ‘Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original! It’s such a contribution! It’s so you!’” (9). Although Karim enjoys the attention he gets from Eva, he cannot help but to notice how he is there as something for Eva to ‘try on’ and he sees the need she feels to “scour that suburban stigma right off her body” (134). Hoping that Haroon will give some meaning, significance to her life and elevate her social status she later on declares: “My good and deep friend Haroon here, he will show us the Way. The Path” (13). The image of the East as exotic, even therapeutic for the West returns as Helen, a friend of Karim’s from school, tells Haroon, whom she considers “spiritual” and “a wise man” (72): “‘We like you being here. You benefit our country with your traditions’” (74). In his role as guru Haroon lives up to a stereotype that white-Britons are comfortable with. His differentness is celebrated. The reason the suburbanites are so ready to accept Haroon as a guru is because it coheres with their perspective on ‘Indianness’. It is an old cliché that they are comfortable with. It is also an image they can borrow:

[…] the house was owned by Carl and Marianne, friends of Eva, who’d recently been trekking in India. This was immediately obvious from the sandalwood Buddhas, brass ashtrays and striped plaster elephants which decorated every available space. And by the fact that Carl and Marianne stood barefoot at the doors as we entered, the palms of their hands together in prayer and their heads bowed as if they were temple servants and not partners in the local TV rental firm of Rumbold & Toedrip (30)

According to Schoene, the middle class Britons, here the suburbanites, are experiencing an identity crisis after losing their power as colonialists and imperialists. Suffering from “severe cultural dislocation” (Schoene 112) with their socio-economic status, cultural prestige and national identity threatened by immigrant populations from former British colonies, many are desperate to create a new identity for themselves and, in lack of meaningful self-identification, become fascinated by the ‘exotic colourfulness’, ‘mysticism’ and ‘dynamic vigour’ of Eastern culture. Haroon has been elected to cure their “inner emptiness” (35). Others make one last desperate attempt to reclaim their illusory supremacy by turning to racism as a form of control. Nostalgic for a self-image of imperial superiority, they want to affirm their difference, their higher status. An example of this is manifested in Helen’s father, or “Hairy Back” (40), as Karim calls him, who shouts at Karim: “‘We don’t want you blackies coming to the house.’ […] ‘However many niggers there are, we don’t like it.’” (40).
In a postcolonial and post imperial world many characters turn out to have cause for an identity crisis, whether it is the process of stigmatisation against immigrant culture, or the lack of meaningful self-identification to replace the previous status of superiority. The need to re-examine what constitutes British identity and how we view the relationship between East and West, if there should even be such a distinction, becomes increasingly clear throughout the novel. In the discriminatory behaviour and stigmatisation against those of a non Anglo-British identity we can clearly see the damaging impact of Orientalist learning on attitudes and values persisting even in postcolonial times. The out of date perspective has become an obstacle for a harmonious, well functioning multicultural community.
5. Conclusion

Through his narration Karim gives a fuller picture of himself. His account goes beyond his witticisms and humorous tone, with perceptive comments that reveal a much more reflective person than the careless adventure seeker he sometimes pretends to be. It shows the complexity of identity, in his individuality, how he relates to other people and groups and how this is constantly renegotiated. The narration provides a clearer view of Karim, but not by restricting his identity, placing him within one category or letting one side of him exclude the other, but by allowing him to be mobile and many things at once. Karim’s mobility, his going back and forth, and, even more so, his ability to feel content about this is what sets him apart from the other characters. Unlike Karim, the other characters struggle with ambivalence and seek therefore what they consider an ‘authentic’, i.e. clearly defined, identity.

The novel shows very effectively the falseness and the danger in the ideal of authenticity. With characters constantly going in and out of roles, taking up religion, going silver, switching music genres, picking up accents, it reveals how easily ‘authenticity’ turns into being about things that are nothing but superficial. How the ‘genuine’ is just a façade, an act. Furthermore, there is an even bigger danger in the ideal of authenticity than its mere falseness. In its superficiality it becomes an excuse for stereotyping and controlling cultural identity and by reducing cultures to stereotypes and clichés, it puts very strict limits on expressions of identity and promotes essentialist views. In order to be authentic the characters need to make sure to be perceived as one thing, whether it be ‘Indian’ or ‘English’, and one thing only. This stops multiculturalism and any kind of overlapping between cultures and traditions in its tracks since it only allows people to have one core identity that they are born with and will keep for the rest of their lives and leaves no room for mobility. The demand for authenticity has the effect of dehumanising both individuals and cultures, by denying their potential range and diversity. In the binary structured discourse on identity and culture that has shaped so many of the characters’ way of negotiating who they are and where they belong, categorisation and dividing people comes as a very natural consequence. As people are categorised and divided into groups, into ‘us’ and ‘them’, prejudices and processes of stigmatisation soon follow.

Perhaps the radical transformations the characters go through are not so bizarre, if we consider them as a way to escape some of the prejudices and feelings of rejection that they are faced with. It is not too hard to understand why Haroon would choose the role of
inspiring and wise spiritual leader, before the role of second-class citizen. And when being
British is no longer a symbol for status or class, it is not too strange an idea that Eva would
want to seek out another way of staying relevant and find meaning elsewhere. Unfortunately,
in neither of these cases do the characters break free from the outdated interpretation of
Eastern identity made by Orientalists. Instead, they end up reinforcing the very tradition that
caused the stigmatisation and the struggle over power to begin with. It is Karim who becomes
the one to break preconceived notions on cultural and ethnic identity, staying mobile, moving
between cultures, and refusing to alienate himself from either side of his background. When
his work as an actor does not live up to this life philosophy of freedom of expression and he is
made to play humiliating caricatures, rather than characters, he expresses his distress to the
reader. In the creation of Karim the novel celebrates individuality, individual freedom.
Furthermore, the novel calls for a more tolerant view of different cultures and a wider
perspective on what constitutes identity, which will only become increasingly important as
our communities become more and more culturally diverse.
Bibliography


