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**Almost an Englishman:
Black and British Identities in Three Contemporary British Novels**

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Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the MA degree in English Literature

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Abstract

This project describes the work of three contemporary British novelists as they explore the possibility of self-identifying as black and British in contemporary Britain, despite the prevalence of racist attitudes that hold that these two identities are mutually exclusive. The three novels examined – *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali – present black protagonists who self-identify as British. While other characters in the novels either conform to assimilationist or diasporic models of identity, where the subject seeks to expunge all “black” characteristics in favour of conforming to stereotypical “white” cultural norms, or retreat from “white” characteristics into an essentialized version of the values of their “home” countries, Karim, Irie, and Nazneen establish spaces for themselves within British society that allow them to try on different identities. By acknowledging the variability of identity, all three protagonists are able to self-identify as being both black and British.

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1. Introduction: Identity in Postcolonial Britain

At the close of the nineteenth century, colonial subjects in economically and politically important British colonies such as India were encouraged to think of themselves as British, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion. The primary means of disseminating this sense of Britishness was education, especially in the field of literature. British poetry, novels, and written histories were used to disseminate British ideas and values to colonial subjects through education programs established by the colonial government (Loomba 75). The dissolution of the British Empire after the Second World War and the successful bids for independence by its various colonies led to a migration of many former colonial subjects to their former imperial capital. These unprecedented movements in population called into question the notion of an inclusive British identity; white British subjects in the United Kingdom did not unduly concern themselves with the implications of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean subjects self-identifying as British until its logical consequence became apparent – namely, large numbers of foreign subjects electing to emigrate to the United Kingdom. The sudden reversal of migration patterns led for many immigrants to the shattering of their illusions about being simultaneously black and British, as former colonial subjects faced the systemic racism of white British society. The form, tone, and intensity of these racist attitudes have changed over the last six decades, but the practice of white Britons setting up black and British as diametrically opposed points of identity has persisted, and continues to persist, since the end of the Second World War.

This perception that being black and being British are antithetical states is being exploded by black writers in the United Kingdom, writers who are often second- or third-generation black Britons and who identify themselves as British despite personal experiences of racism and exclusion by the white British majority. In exploring what it means to be black

in Britain, these authors are also redefining what it means to be British. They are not merely resurrecting the former concept of the imperial British citizen, who held British tastes and attitudes in spite of his or her skin colour; rather, they are establishing Britishness as something more inclusive than it was formerly conceived of as being.

Novelist, playwright, and screenwriter Hanif Kureishi is an excellent example of these new black British writers. He was born in London to an English mother and a Pakistani father, and his work explores the changing notion of what it means to be British in the postcolonial era, exploring themes of belonging, racism, personal history and identity. Kureishi's autobiographical essay "The Rainbow Sign" describes his personal, continuing struggle with racism as a biracial man living in contemporary Britain, as well as his experience visiting Pakistan as a young adult.

Kureishi's youth as described in this essay was punctuated by racism and an expectation by the white people around him that he adhere to stereotypes of South Asians, despite his relative ignorance of South Asian culture and his complete self-identification as British. Kureishi writes:

When I was nine or ten a teacher purposefully placed some pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts in front of me and said to the class: Hanif comes from India. I wondered: did my uncles ride camels? Surely not in their suits? Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowglis, half-naked and eating with their fingers? (Kureishi "Rainbow" 9)

The continued racism he experienced from peers and authority figures alike drove Kureishi to want to erase his black identity entirely, both culturally and physically:

From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else. I read with understanding a story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he notices that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water. (Kureishi "Rainbow" 9)

This retreat from his Pakistani heritage is demonstrated as impossible when the members of his immediate peer group transform seemingly over-night into white supremacists (Kureishi “Rainbow” 11). He retreats within himself, and begins to catalogue the racist statements by members of parliament that punctuated the 1960s, quoting the likes of Enoch Powell¹ and Duncan Sandys. In a 1967 speech, later reprinted in national newspapers, Sandys said: “The breeding of millions of half-caste children would merely produce a generation of misfits and create national tension” (Kureishi “Rainbow” 11). Kureishi, in spite of his embarrassment over his Pakistani heritage, rejected this racist expectation: “I wasn’t a misfit; I could join the elements of myself together. It was the others, they wanted misfits; they wanted you to embody within yourself their ambivalence” (Kureishi “Rainbow” 11).

Now brutally aware of the racism pervading the society around him, Kureishi was initially attracted to the Black Power movement of the United States and its association with Islam. Eventually, however, he saw the likes of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X as simply embodying a complementary kind of racism. He identified instead with James Baldwin, who deplored the black Muslims’ “turning to Africa and to Islam, this turning away from the reality of America and ‘inventing’ the past” (Kureishi “Rainbow” 14). Kureishi writes,

That the men I wanted to admire had liberated themselves only to take to unreason, to the abdication of intelligence, was shocking to me. And the separatism, the total loathing of the white man as innately corrupt, the ‘All whites are devils’ view, was equally unacceptable. I had to live in England, in the suburbs of London, with whites. My mother was white. I wasn’t ready for separate development. I’d had too much of that already. (Kureishi “Rainbow” 14)

¹ According to Kureishi, the public racism of such an important political figure as Enoch Powell, who saw racial diversity as being unsustainable and envisaged a future of widespread inter-racial violence, gave confidence and a self-perceived legitimacy to the racist elements of white British society: “As Powell’s speeches appeared in the papers, graffiti in support of him appeared in the London streets. Racists gained confidence. People insulted me in the streets” (Kureishi “Rainbow” 11). For further information on Powell, his 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech in Birmingham, and its impact on British race relations, see Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: the Life of Enoch Powell* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998).

Kureishi rejected both white and black forms of racial essentialism and racist dogma. His exploration of his own identity, however, was not complete until he visited Pakistan.

In Pakistan, Kureishi fully realized that he was simultaneously black and British.

Though he had Pakistani heritage through his father, he was not Pakistani himself:

I couldn't allow myself to feel too Pakistani. I didn't want to give in to that falsity, that sentimentality. As someone said to me at a party, provoked by the fact I was wearing jeans: we are Pakistanis, but you, you will always be a Paki – emphasizing the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis, and therefore the fact that I couldn't rightfully lay claim to either place. (Kureishi *Rainbow* 17)

Despite the familial history that he uncovered in Pakistan, the “stories to help me see my place in the world and give me a sense of the past which could go into making a life in the present and future” (Kureishi “*Rainbow*” 35), Kureishi could not remain in Pakistan because he missed England too much, and realized that it was his home: despite the pain and fear of the politically-supported and sustained racism he experienced, Kureishi described England as “my country”. He wrote:

It is strange to go away to the land of your ancestors, to find out how much you have in common with people there, yet at the same time to realize how British you are, the extent to which, as Orwell says: ‘the suet puddings and the red pillar boxes have entered into your soul’. It isn't *that* you wanted to find out. But it is part of what you do find out. And you find out what little choice you have in the matter of your background and where you belong. You look forward to getting back; you think often of England and what it means to you – and you think often of what it means to be British. (Kureishi “*Rainbow*” 35-36, emphasis in original)

This new definition of what it means to be British is the attempt to reconcile those components of identity that have been traditionally interpreted as at best completely separate and at worst antithetical: being black and being British.

Recent history, as well as the personal experiences of thousands of British citizens like Hanif Kureishi, points to the fact that, in spite of continued racist sentiments hostile to the changed circumstances, the reality is that notions of Britishness do, and necessarily must,

include notions of blackness. The realities of contemporary Britain's ethnic demographics demand such a broadening of what it means to be British and an inclusion of Britain's black population in that meaning.² This redefinition must take place in accordance with Britain's particular status as a postcolonial society and against the context of the history of relations between white Britons and members of other racial and ethnic groups during and after the colonial period.

When discussing Britain as a postcolonial society it is important to keep in mind the multivalent definition of the term "postcolonial." According to Ania Loomba,

it is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. Such a position would allow us to include people geographically displaced by colonialism such as African-Americans or people of Asian or Caribbean origins in Britain as 'postcolonial' subjects although they live within metropolitan cultures. (Loomba 16)

Thus, Britain can be read as a postcolonial society because a significant number of its population are postcolonial subjects (that is, ex-colonial subjects or the descendants of ex-colonial subjects), despite Britain's former (and arguably continuing) status as the centre in a colonial centre/periphery relationship to those nations which became British colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This centre/periphery dichotomy continues to influence the idea of "Britishness" in the postcolonial period, having heavily influenced the relationship between the white British majority and the visible minority populations who arrived in Britain in substantial numbers after the Second World War.

Prior to the Second World War, Britain's population was racially relatively homogeneous (although the racialization of Irish identity in the nineteenth century might

² As of 2001, 7.5% of Britain's population was made up of people identified as "black" (of South Asian, African, Afro-European, and mixed descent), comprising some 4.6 million people (*National Statistics Online*).

represent a significant exception to this rule³) while remaining culturally or ethnically diverse.

My project defines “race” as,

a marker of an ‘imagined community’, a phrase that Benedict Anderson has used in relation to the nation. Both nations and races are imagined communities which bind fellow human beings and demarcate them from others. Both speak to members of all classes and genders (although this does not mean that all classes and genders are treated as equal within them). (Loomba 102)

The primary marker used to demarcate members of a particular race is, of course, skin colour, and in our discussion of race in Britain the primary division will be that between ‘white’ (referring to those of Western and Northern European descent, especially those with English, Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish backgrounds) and ‘black’ (referring to those of South Asian, African, or Afro-Caribbean descent). It is extremely important to note, however, that skin colour itself is largely an imagined signifier:

While colour is taken to be the prime signifier of racial identity, the latter is actually shaped by perceptions of religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, sexual and class differences. “Race” as a concept receives its meanings contextually, and in relation to other social groupings and hierarchies, such as gender and class. (Loomba 105)

Despite the fact that, in the final analysis, both race and its signifiers are inherently constructed in time, and thus largely arbitrary and subject to successful and empowering deconstruction, it must be kept in mind that it still has a significant and detrimental impact on the everyday lives of everyone: “despite the fact that racial classification may be at several levels a ‘delusion’ and a myth, [. . .] it is all too real in its pernicious social effects” (Loomba 106).

The racial heterogeneity of contemporary Britain is a product of the twentieth century. By the end of the Second World War and the ensuing economic expansion, Britain faced a substantial labour shortage; simultaneously, its former colonies had a large labour

³ The use of race as signifier to justify the exploitation of an indigenous population by colonizers was used in the case of Ireland by the British despite the lack of colour difference between the two population groups (Loomba 109).

force but insufficient means of production. Migration from ex-colonies to the British metropolis in the 1950s was a direct product of the history of colonialism: “If once the colonies had been a source of cheap raw materials, now they became a source of cheap labour” (Brah 21). These new ex-colonial subjects represented the first major population shift of non-whites to Britain and dramatically changed the demographics of British society.

The new immigrants from the former colonies (most of them hailing from South Asia or the Caribbean) faced substantial economic and social obstacles upon arriving in the United Kingdom. The only jobs available to them were those deemed undesirable by the white working class: “unskilled jobs involving unsociable hours of work, poor working conditions and low wages” which forced black immigrants to occupy “some of the lowest rungs of the British employment hierarchy” (Brah 21). In addition, as ex-colonial subjects, they were still subject to those beliefs and prejudices that had been cemented in the white British point-of-view during the colonial era. These precedents ascribed racial and biologically – or culturally – determined superiority to whites, and denigrated black immigrants and their descendants.

The application of the term “black” to people of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean descent living in Britain emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as an adoption by those communities of the term used by the Black Power movement in the United States, which stripped the word of its pejorative connotations. This new interpretation of the “black” label eschewed “chromatism” (the practice of differentiation among African-Americans according to degree of skin tone) and instead transformed the term into a “political colour to be claimed *against* colour-based racism” (Brah 97, emphasis added). The use of the term “black” by communities (especially South Asians) that did not relate to its original redefinition by African-Americans came as a response to the pejorative categories of “immigrant” and

“ethnic minority,” that, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, had “come to denote racialized re-definitions of belonging and subjecthood” (Brah 98).

Relations between the white majority and the new black minority were influenced by the concept of assimilation in the 1950s and 1960s; policies of dispersing young blacks across various school districts and heavy restrictions on the immigration of blacks were justified as part of a general effort to assimilate them into dominant, white Britishness. According to Avtar Brah, “The problem tended to be couched primarily in terms of ‘helping the immigrant to adjust to the host society,’ which assumed that eventually blacks in Britain would abandon their ‘archaic cultures’ in favour of a ‘Western lifestyle’” (Brah 23). By the mid-1960s, however, the assimilation model proved to be unacceptable to substantial portions of the black community, and so liberal authorities in Britain largely abandoned it in favour of “integration,” a series of policies that sought to establish equality across racial divides but glossed over and ignored the key problem of an economically-divided Britain. The privileging of integration over assimilation gave rise to the “race relations industry,” a collection of public and private organizations set up in an attempt to enact anti-discrimination legislation to counteract the entrenched racism that marked immigration policy, education, employment, and social relations for blacks in Britain (Brah 26).

The 1960s and 1970s saw a reduction in the desire of black immigrants in Britain to return to their countries of origin (Brah 27), simultaneously with the emergence of the first generation of young Asians and Afro-Caribbeans born and educated in Britain (Brah 40-41). The reality of individuals who were capable of, and interested in, participating in both cultural traditions (that of their parents and that of Britain) threw the concept of a “culture clash” into doubt; while there is still significant concern that young people of colour living in Britain feel unaccountable stress and identity-conflict from being exposed to two cultures

(one in the private sphere, the other in the public), such a label applied to all black youths in Britain since the 1960s and 1970s is a gross oversimplification at best. As Brah writes,

the caricature invoked by terms such as ‘between two cultures’, ‘culture clash’, and ‘identity conflict’, which portrays [black youths] as disoriented, confused and atomised individuals, is not supported by the evidence. There are many and varied influences that impact differently upon different [black youths], which makes for very heterogeneous and variable outcomes. (Brah 41-42)

Instead of producing a generation of young people hampered by internal conflict, the 1970s produced a number of youth groups aimed at the protection of the black community from white racism. These groups articulated a “home-grown political discourse” that laid claim to the neighborhoods and communities where group members lived. According to Brah, “however much they are constructed as ‘outsiders’, they contest these psychological and geographical spaces from the position of ‘insiders’” (Brah 47). These young people now identified themselves as both black and British.

It is from this movement of black empowerment and the claim by second- and subsequent-generation visible minorities to Britain (rather than the South Asian subcontinent or the Caribbean) as their home that the problem of being simultaneously black and British truly emerges. What does it mean to belong simultaneously to the dominant culture of a formerly-imperial nation and the subordinate culture of one of its former colonies? Is such simultaneous inclusion in opposed groups possible or viable, especially in light of the subordination and denigration of colonial culture and tradition by the British during colonization? Can black people living in Britain maintain their black identities and still participate in Britishness?

Much contemporary British fiction grapples with what it means to be a postcolonial subject living in the British metropolis. My research project identifies a growing trend in British writing of novels, written by men and women of colour and drawing on their own

experiences as members of a visible minority in a white-dominant society, that attempt to explore the reality of being simultaneously black and British. These novels share a number of elements. They centre on a biracial, black, or subaltern protagonist who is able to navigate between the dominant white and subordinate black localities and establish some kind of space for self-definition between them, thereby participating in both cultures. In each case, the central protagonist's success in participating in both black and traditional British cultural modes is established by his or her juxtaposition against other characters hailing from visible minorities whose journey toward self-definition is hampered by dependence on an essentialized understanding of either dominant white British culture or the culture of their country of origin. The three examples of this trend investigated in this thesis are Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003).

All three novels celebrate identity formation based on an understanding of the plasticity of cultures and the porousness of the boundaries between them. They also point out the dangers of essentialism, the notion of an "ultimate essence that transcends historical and cultural boundaries" (Brah 95), suggesting that an essentialist perspective on culture cannot stand up to the realities of contemporary multicultural Britain. Those characters in the novels who attempt to maintain a "pure," diasporic space within Britain free of the "corruption" of white British culture, such as Anwar in *The Buddha of Suburbia* or Samad in *White Teeth*, cannot maintain such a position indefinitely, as the porous nature of culture ultimately leads to the inclusion of outside elements that render an essentialist diasporic space unstable. In addition, those characters who attempt complete assimilation, such as Magid in *White Teeth* or Chanu in *Brick Lane*, are prone to a similar essentialist notion of what it means to be British, and these preconceived notions ultimately fail in the face of the reality of a complex

contemporary Britain. They are also unable to erase their racial identities; no matter how far they go toward denying their non-Western origins, the simple fact of their skin colour still prevents these characters from total assimilation into the dominant white culture of Britain.

By contrast, the protagonists of these novels manage to pass through the desire to isolate themselves in diaspora or assimilate completely and establish for themselves spaces for self-definition. In the case of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the novel's protagonist, Karim Amir, manages to begin to disentangle himself from both his self-imposed English identity and the racist expectations of the white people who surround him. The novel ends with his reflecting on "the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself" (Kureishi 283-284) and looking toward a bright future of self-definition. Irie Jones, the protagonist of *White Teeth*, experiences a *Bildungsroman* journey of self-definition, moving from the desire to assimilate to white British culture, to the desire to embrace her Jamaican heritage in order to escape her failed assimilation, and finally to the freeing of herself from the fetters of both to establish a kind of cosmopolitan space that accords to "the perfect blankness of the past" (Smith 402): disconnected from either national-historical expectation, she can choose to participate in both. Smith even provides a physical incarnation of this cosmopolitan space in the form of Irie's daughter. Nazneen, the protagonist of *Brick Lane*, reverses colonial expectation by establishing a space of self-defining freedom despite her initial status as a marginalized South Asian woman, while her colonized, educated husband fails to do so and is eventually forced to return to Bangladesh.

Any discussion of self-definition by postcolonial subjects in Britain requires a definition of the methods by which identity is constructed and reconstructed. As previously mentioned, the contemporary novels discussed in this thesis describe at least four such methods of dealing with the pressures of cultural identity in contemporary, multicultural

Britain. Those characters that do not manage to eke out a space for themselves where they can enact the role of being simultaneously black and British fail because they choose to adhere to only one or the other role; they either will not or cannot accept both elements, clinging to an essentialist conception of origin and remaining in diaspora at the cost of becoming British, or of attempting to “white-wash” themselves by erasing as much of their inherited cultural identity as they can in order to assimilate into British society. These two responses to the need for self-definition – diaspora and assimilation – are represented as unambiguously negative in the novels. Those characters who subscribe to them are juxtaposed against the novels’ protagonists in order to highlight the relative success of self-definition from a standpoint that acknowledges that cultures are not monolithic and predetermined, rigid, unchanging, and ahistorical, but instead fluid and porous, the products of historic and geographic circumstance, often forming at the borders between social groups. Whereas assimilation and diaspora are questioned in these novels, hybridity and cosmopolitanism are celebrated.

Assimilationist self-definition occurs when a person of colour living in a society dominated by “white” ideals that offer “few images with which to identify” (Thompson 128) chooses to abandon or deny all parts of his or her inherited ethnic identity in favour of adopting (and largely *not* adapting) elements of those white ideals. The subject of assimilation reconstructs him- or herself, both physically and psychologically, as completely as possible according to the dominant social norms of his or her adopted nation. Of course, no matter how closely members of a visible minority adopt the language, traditions, customs, and behavioural patterns of the dominant cultural group, they will always be divided from it by the simple fact of those socially constructed but inescapable markers of race that still remain more than a half-century after the “end” of colonialism. Additionally, assimilation is often

based on a kind of stereotyping or essentializing of the dominant culture, a view that cannot account for the mutability of the dominant culture with regards to class, gender, location and history. Assimilationist identities constructed in the postcolonial subject's country of origin before his or her arrival in Britain are often based on essentialized, stereotyped or anachronistic ideas of what it means to be British and are doomed to collapse when they come into contact with the diversity of contemporary British reality.

The attempt to establish a diasporic space for self-definition, or what Roy Sommer refers to as the "diasporic response," stems from the desire to retain the traditions and beliefs of the homeland in resistance to the influences of the subject's adopted country (Sommer 177). Like the assimilationist, the diasporic subject is often hampered by a binary division between dominant and "other," and sees no possibility for finding a place in between; the subordinate culture of origin and the dominant culture of destination are seen as mutually exclusive and essentially incompatible. The desire to resist assimilation forces the diasporic subject to adopt a rigid, essentialist vision of the homeland divorced from historical context, assumed to be whole, complete, indivisible, unchanging and incorruptible, a perspective that cannot help but be shaken by the realities of historical and social change.

The demands of assimilation and diaspora can affect the same subject simultaneously and dangerously influence the attempt to find a place in between:

Those with 'hyphenated' identities, then, as well as having to encounter such racist beliefs, may find themselves having to choose between colluding with dominant social and cultural practices, thereby possibly weakening their own sense of rootedness, or rejecting the ideas of assimilation or integration altogether and remaining 'rootless' on society's margins. Or they may have little choice but to inhabit the 'in-between' which – according to *White Teeth* – is not always an easy place to be. (Thompson 131)

In both cases, identity formation rests on a Lacanian concept of the nation (either the adopted destination or the 'homeland' of origin) as "a fantasy space, an imaginary body onto

which individuals can project their desires of wholeness, completeness and belonging; a space that momentarily removes the lack with which individuals are burdened by their move into the symbolic world of adulthood” (Bentley 486). Resting solely on one or the other of these fantasy spaces, or on elements of both which are held to be immutable and thus incompatible, cannot provide a stable space for the subject to define him- or herself.

Of course, there are options open to immigrants of colour and their descendents living in the western metropolis that do not depend on complete adherence to either side of the dominant/subordinate division. Recognition of the mutability and interaction of cultures allows for the construction of a hybrid identity, a self-definition that borrows from two or more cultural traditions (typically the subordinate culture of the subject’s origin and the dominant culture of the destination) without relying on an essentialist perspective on either. According to the most important theorist on hybridity, Homi K. Bhabha, hybrid identity is the inevitable outcome of the colonial attempt to assimilate native populations into the dominant colonizing cultural mode: “Bhabha suggests that colonial authority is necessarily rendered ‘hybrid’ and ‘ambivalent’ when it is imitated or reproduced, thus opening up spaces for the colonised to subvert the master-discourse” (Loomba 78). According to this perspective, the colonial project to reproduce imperialist cultural modes in the colonial subjects could not and did not produce perfect replicas; instead, these products were inevitably infused with elements of native culture. In other words, the colonial masters could not help but produce hybrid cultures when attempting to impose their own traditions, languages, and values on their colonial subjects.

The term hybrid is derived from biology, referring to the offspring of two discreet species. The strong association of biological hybridization with the sterile mule poses the danger of rendering cultural hybridization as both a product of biological determinism

(meaning that culture is biologically determined and thus disempowering) and incapable of reproduction (meaning that hybrid identities cannot be shared among a visible minority cross-generational community living in the metropolis). This assumption of the negative connotations of the biological origin of the term hybrid is misleading. Néstor García Canclini argues that even the biological source for the term does not necessarily require an understanding of the product of hybridization as sterile or detrimental to social development: the biological hybridization of plants, dating back to the work of Mendel in 1870, produces not the infecundity of a mule but instead improves the growth, resistance, quality, and economic and nutritional value of the hybridized plants (Canclini xxvi). Taking hybridity beyond its biological context can actually reduce and undermine views of the biological determinism of culture; Canclini writes that, “The social (Hall; Papastergiadis) and linguistic (Bakhtin; Bhabha) constructions of the concept of hybridization have made possible a departure from the biological and essentialist discourses of cultural identity, authenticity, and purity” (Canclini xxvii).

The process of investigating and describing hybridity problematizes the concept of identity that it modifies. To begin with, the meaning of identity is elusive and difficult to pin down. Brah writes that,

We speak of ‘this’ identity and ‘that’ identity. We know from our everyday experience that what we call ‘me’ or ‘I’ is not the same in every situation; that we are changing from day to day. Yet there is something we ‘recognise’ in ourselves and in others which we call ‘me’ and ‘you’ and ‘them’. In other words, we are all constantly changing but this *changing illusion* is precisely what we see as real and concrete about ourselves and others. And this *seeing* is both a social and a psychological process. Identity then is an enigma which, by its very nature, defies a precise definition. (Brah 20, emphasis in original)

Brah further complicates her definition by quoting E.H. Erikson. Erikson writes that identities are formed largely unconsciously, except under extreme conditions where “identity-

consciousness” is forced on the subject; that identity is “a *subjective* sense of an *invigorating sameness and continuity*”; that individual identity and cultural identity (that is, the identity of the community) are intrinsically linked and simultaneously co-generated; and that “identity is never ‘established’ as an ‘achievement’ in the sense of a personality armour, or of anything static and unchanging” (Brah 20, quoting Erikson, emphasis in original). Identity is “simultaneously subjective and social, and is constituted through culture” (Brah 21). It is not a fixed state of being, but rather a continuous activity of self-definition, heavily tied to one’s social environment and culture. Culture, like identity, is the constant activity of self-definition, but at the level of the society or nation rather than the individual; it is the “symbolic construction of the vast array of a social group’s life experiences” and “the embodiment, the chronicle of a group’s history” (Brah 18).

Discussing identity as if it is an object rather than a process inevitably leads to the ossification of individual identities, thus disempowering the individual who is enacting the identity and denying the possibility for change. As Canclini writes,

Studies of identitarian narratives conducted from theoretical perspectives that take into account processes of hybridization (Hannerz; Hall) show that it is not possible to speak of identities as if they were simply a matter of a set of fixed characteristics, or to posit them as the essence of an ethnicity or nation. (Canclini xxviii)

Of specific importance is the realization that identity is a continuous process of becoming rather than a fixed state of being. Gayatri Spivak writes, “I have trouble with questions of identity or voice. I’m much more interested in questions of space” (Spivak 21). According to Spivak, fighting for identity can itself become oppressive when a claim is made as to the essence or nature of an identity, because it denies individual agency and fluency. Instead, she describes a process of clearing a space from which one can create a perspective, a “self-separating project” that does not require the inclusion of a fixed and authoritative identity or

voice, but still has the potential to resist territorial occupation (Spivak 21). Thus, it is perhaps more accurate to describe the creation of a space for constant identity reformation and enactment, rather than to describe identity formation itself.

Hybridity pushes the impermanence and fluidity of identity still further. Canclini writes,

These diverse, ongoing processes of hybridization lead to a relativizing of the notion of identity. They even call into question the tendency on the part of anthropology and of a certain sector of cultural studies to take up identities as a research object. The emphasis on hybridization not only puts an end to the pretense of establishing “pure” or “authentic” identities; in addition, it demonstrates the risk of delimiting local, self-contained identities or those that attempt to assert themselves as radically opposed to national society or globalization. When an identity is defined through a process of abstraction of traits (language, traditions, certain stereotyped behaviors), there is often a tendency to remove those practices from the history of mixing in which they were formed. Consequently, one mode of understanding the identity becomes absolute, and the heterodox ways of speaking the language, making music, or interpreting the traditions are rejected. One winds up, in short, sealing off the possibility of modifying culture and politics. (Canclini xxviii)

The possibility of hybridization itself explodes concepts of discrete, monolithic, or essentialized identities and emphasizes culture as a product of change and circumstance. The acknowledgment of the hybridization process reveals the complex, composite nature of culture and identity, and allows for the simultaneous existence of multiple perspectives.

The hybridity model is not without its flaws. The Bhabhian notion of hybridity has been criticized on the basis that it maintains the binary division between dominant and subordinate or colonizer and colonized. Ania Loomba writes,

Several critics, and most notably Homi K. Bhabha, have emphasised the failure of colonial regimes to produce stable and fixed identities, and suggested that ‘hybridity’ of identities and the ‘ambivalence’ of colonial discourse more adequately describes the dynamics of the colonial encounter. But Jan Mohamed argues that ambivalence is itself a product of ‘imperial duplicity’ and that underneath it all, a Manichean dichotomy between coloniser and colonised is what really structures colonial relations. (Loomba 91-92)

Loomba's citation of Mohamad is echoed by Pirjo Ahokas, who criticizes Bhabha's concept of hybridity for "deliberately avoiding constructive, political commitments" and leaving the colonizer/colonized dichotomy "pretty much intact" (Ahokas "Constructing" 126). Many critics, especially Pheng Cheah, Bruce Robins, Arjun Appadurai, and even Bhabha, have moved beyond the limitations of hybridity and begun to explore an alternative means of intercultural identification and participation, such as a new postcolonial understanding of cosmopolitanism.

No matter their form, whether "pure", hybrid, or cosmopolitan, any discussions of identity formation imply a fixity of such identities, at both the cultural and individual level. Establishing a hybrid identity still implies that there are two or more stable identities that must be mixed together or borrowed from in order to establish the hybrid. The establishment of a hybrid identity implies that a subject must establish a fixed and single identity, rather than being able to adopt different identities at different times under different internal and external circumstances. Thus, rather than discussing the formation of an identity or identities, we may find it more fruitful to discuss the formation of a space in which to try on various identities.

How does the study of complex social interactions and the establishing of spaces for identity formation relate to contemporary British novels? Can complex methods of self-definition developed for use in anthropology, sociology, psychology, or political theory be applied to the characters or narratives found in a work of fiction? It is important to remember that the location of Bhabhian hybridization between cultures is first and foremost within language, and what better place to find a complex confluence of language, thought and practice than literature? Loomba reminds us that,

literary texts do not simply reflect dominant ideologies, but encode the tensions, complexities and nuances within colonial cultures. Literature is a place where 'transculturation' takes place in all its complexity. Literature written on both sides of the colonial divide often absorbs, appropriates and inscribes aspects of the 'other' culture, creating new genres, ideas and identities in the process. Finally, literature is also an important means of appropriating, inverting or challenging dominant means of representation and colonial ideologies. (Loomba 36)

Literature thus serves multiple functions simultaneously. It has the potential to describe the creation of a space for postcolonial self-definition; to explore the possible approaches to such a process from a variety of character-based perspectives; and to serve as a tool for the actual creation of such a space, for both the author and the reader.

Literature has always had a strong influence on shaping conceptions of identity and culture, especially in the colonial period. Its use during the British Empire was marked by predominant views of white superiority to black that was the hallmark of the time throughout Europe and the developed world:

Even those literary texts that are, arguably, distant from or even critical of colonial ideologies can be made to serve colonial interests through educational systems that devalue native literatures, and by Euro-centric critical practices which insist on certain Western texts being the markers of superior culture and value. The rise of literary studies as a 'discipline' of study in British universities was in fact linked to the perceived needs of colonial administrators: English literature was instituted as a formal discipline in London and Oxford only after the Indian Civil Service examinations began to include a 1000 mark paper in it, on the assumption that knowledge of English literature was necessary for those who would be administering British interests. Soon after, it was also deemed important that the natives themselves be instructed in Western literatures. Thomas Babington Macaulay, the architect of English education in India, put the case succinctly in his famous 'Minute on Indian Education' written in 1835: English education, he suggested, would train natives who were 'Indian in blood and colour' to become 'English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'. (Loomba 75)

British literature was used to reinforce a notion of white superiority on both sides of the colonial divide. It celebrated Britishness at the cost of native traditions, and served as the primary means of indoctrinating the higher echelons of colonial society (the literati).

Those texts that did describe or discuss the possibility for cultural cross-pollination were consistently written from a Eurocentric perspective that robbed the colonial individual of his or her agency and subjecthood; in these texts,

only the European is individuated. The 'mark of the plural', Albert Memmi tells us, is a 'sign of the colonised's depersonalization': 'The colonised is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity ("They are this"; "They are all the same")' (1967:88). (Loomba 118)

Any discussion of cultural intermixing (that is, of any cultural exchange outside of the imperial dissemination of British traditions within native populations) was similarly skewed to present only the colonizer's perspective, and represented any kind of cultural adaptation as an infection of pure or authentic British identity by something base, inferior, or barbarous:

Both in novels and in non-fictional narratives, the crossing of boundaries appears as a dangerous business, especially for those who are attracted to or sympathise with the alien space or people. 'Going native' is potentially unhinging. The colonised land seduces European men into madness. [...] In [Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*] as in much colonialist fiction, Africa is a place where the European mind disintegrates and regresses into a primitive state. Africa, India, China and other alien lands induce madness, they *are* madness itself. (Loomba 117, emphasis in original)

The works of literature investigated in this thesis, however, reverse these biases. They present the relationship between blacks and whites in contemporary Britain from a primarily black perspective. They generate visions of cultural interaction, exchange, and commingling as positive. They generate narratives of inclusion over exclusion, of multiplicity over hegemony, and hybridity and cosmopolitanism over assimilation and diaspora. Each of the following chapters will examine the journey of the protagonist of one of the three novels (Karim Amir from *The Buddha of Suburbia* in Chapter Two, Irie Jones from *White Teeth* in Chapter Three, and Nazneen from *Brick Lane* in Chapter Four) and juxtapose those characters' experiences with the experiences of the secondary characters in each novel, in order to demonstrate each novelist's view of the outcomes consequent upon the main identity choices faced by

immigrant characters. The final chapter will address the identity concerns that still threaten to undermine the self-image of characters successfully self-identifying as both black and British at the conclusions of these novels.

2. Almost an Englishman: Black and British Identities in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* is difficult to categorize. It is in one sense a late-twentieth-century *Bildungsroman*, describing the movement from childhood to maturity of its protagonist and first-person narrator Karim Amir when he is faced with the harsh social realities of 1970s Britain (Finney 124), but one in which the traditional concern of class has been supplanted by that of race. It is also an adaptation of the Balzacian novel, the story of the provincial who comes to the metropolis, but with a multiracial protagonist taking the place of the traditional orphan without a past (King 90). Most important of all for the purposes of this project, it is a story of the problematic vacillation between seemingly conflicting black and British identities of a young black man living in a dramatically transformed postcolonial Britain.

Karim is a prime example of a character caught between conflicting black and British identities. The novel's opening sentence is Karim's equivocal statement of personal identity: "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost" (*Buddha* 3). Here we see Karim's central dilemma. He identifies himself primarily as English and sees himself as a participant in English, and by extension British, cultural norms. But there is something about him that does not quite conform to even his own expectations of what it means to be English, hence the addition of the adverbial qualification. He continues:

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. (*Buddha* 3)

This establishes the reason that Karim is only "almost" an Englishman: his biracial heritage and appearance. It is the conflict between the "two old histories" of England (Karim's home

and environment) and India (his inheritance from his Indian father) and his “odd mixture of continents and blood” (which alters his physical appearance enough from English norms to make him the target of racial prejudice) that cause Karim constantly to vacillate between a sense of belonging and not belonging in contemporary English society.

Internally, Karim is English: it is the language he speaks, the nation he identifies with, and the culture he participates in. Externally, however, he constantly struggles to overcome the assumption of the white majority that he is somehow not English but rather Indian, thanks to the racial marker of his skin colour. As the novel progresses, Karim’s socio-economic success (his employment, his artistic expression, his introduction into middle-class British society) is dependent on his conformity to white expectations deriving from his perceived Indianness, and is achieved at the expense of his authentic English self. It is this conflict between Karim’s inner sense of belonging and his effective exclusion that is central to the novel, informing Kureishi’s attempt via Karim to explore the possibility of reconciliation between black and British identities in contemporary multicultural Britain.

Karim’s English identity, in spite of his Indian heritage and skin colour, is marked out primarily by his juxtaposition with other black characters who do not identify themselves as English. These are all first-generation immigrants from India who, while participating in English society to varying degrees, still self-identify as Indian and ultimately place themselves in opposition to what they perceive as “Englishness”. Of particular importance are Karim’s father Haroon and his “uncle” Anwar, both of whom are unequivocally Indians living in England, in clear contrast to Karim, an Englishman merely stereotyped by surface appearance as Indian.

How is Karim an Englishman? The bold statement of self-identification at the beginning of the novel aside, Karim demonstrates his English identity through his perception

of the people around him, his lack of knowledge and experience of India, his cultural and linguistic knowledge of England, and his various desires for self-transformation in accordance with dominant white norms. One of the strongest elements in his English identity emerges from the ways in which he relates to the two sides of his family: his Indian father on the one hand and his white, English mother, aunt, and uncle on the other. Karim admires his Uncle Ted because of Ted's assured participation in the dominant white culture, something from which Karim's father Haroon is excluded: "Ever since I was tiny I loved Uncle Ted, because he know about the things other boys' fathers know about, and Dad, to my frustration, didn't: fishing and air rifles, aeroplanes, and how to eat winkles" (*Buddha* 33). Karim's affection for his uncle is bound up with his desire to participate himself in mainstream English culture. His uncle represents to him the ideal English father that he has been denied in spite of his self-identification.

Karim further identifies his father in opposition to white Englishness by racializing the term Englishman: he compares his first-generation immigrant father to Haroon's white contemporaries, designating Haroon as "not English" despite his citizenship and position within the English public service. "Like many Indians he was small, but Dad was also elegant and handsome, with delicate hands and manners; beside him most Englishmen looked like clumsy giraffes" (*Buddha* 4). This comparison, made on a physical rather than a cultural basis, underlines "Englishness" as a racial rather than politico-cultural designation. Karim can still self-identify with this physiological understanding of Englishness through his mother, a white Englishwoman, who reinforces his English identity: "But you're not an Indian. You've never been to India ... Who gave birth to you? You're an Englishman, I'm proud to say" (*Buddha* 232). His mother's position is, at least linguistically, irrefutable; Karim is English because he speaks only English, having no knowledge of the languages of his father's homeland. When

faced with the assumption that he must have intimate knowledge of India, or at least an understanding of one of its languages, such as Urdu or Punjabi, Karim cannot even identify which language his white interlocutor is speaking (*Buddha* 141).

Karim perceives his interactions with the various English social sub-groups that he encounters upon his move from the suburbs to central London through the lens of the English class system. His interactions with the upper-middle class, for example, are not conducted from an Indian, or even hybrid, cultural base, but play themselves out as conflicts between different classes within English society: “They called everything by the wrong name, these London people. Dinner was lunch, tea was supper, breakfast was brunch, afters was pudding” (*Buddha* 194). Thus Karim does not compare upper-middle-class English vocabulary to some internalized Indian set of cultural reference points but to his own lower-class English vocabulary.

Karim’s Englishness is also bound up in his desire for self-transformation according to white cultural modes. He constantly strives not only to be with his white friends but to become like them, or indeed to assume their specific identities. His desire for “mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs” is bound up with his desire to be transformed into Charlie, the white boy a year his senior whom he sees as the essence of suburban, white, 1970s, British culture: “I preferred him to me and wanted to be him. I coveted his talents, face, style. I wanted to wake up with them all transferred to me” (*Buddha* 15).

This desire for Charlie is echoed in Karim’s later relationship with Eleanor, the upper-middle-class white actress he meets after moving to London. This relationship opens his perceptions to the intellectual world of the upper-middle classes, and he wants to emulate them (*Buddha* 177). His desire for participation in their cultural modes and inclusion in their society makes Karim want to erase his own past in order to be reshaped into their image: “it

was [Eleanor's] stories that had primacy, her stories that connected to an entire established world. It was as if I felt my past wasn't important enough, wasn't as substantial as hers, so I'd thrown it away" (*Buddha* 178). Once again, Karim does not simply want to be with, sleep with, or possess the person whom he sees as the epitome of white Englishness; he actually wants to be Eleanor, or at least her socio-cultural equivalent. When Eleanor comments on his accent, he immediately responds to this criticism through English class dynamics, resolving to lose his South London accent and speak like her (*Buddha* 178).

Karim's friend and occasional sexual partner Jamila is an illuminating foil for him in this desire for conformity. As the second-generation daughter of Karim's "uncle" Anwar, Jamila shares many biographical details with Karim, and she too initially wants to participate in white modes of behavior. However, she has thoroughly rejected this desire, thanks to her apparent abandonment by her white patroness. Like Karim, Jamila at first wants to erase her South Asian identity and become white (in her case French). Under the tutelage of Miss Cutmore, a Francophile librarian, Jamila, "got this thing about wanting to be Simone de Beauvoir" (*Buddha* 52). Eventually, when Miss Cutmore moves away, Jamila's attitude changes:

Jamila got grudging and started to hate Miss Cutmore for forgetting that she was Indian. Jamila thought Miss Cutmore really wanted to eradicate everything that was foreign in her... she drove me mad by saying that Miss Cutmore had colonized her, but Jamila was the strongest-willed person I'd met: no one could turn her into a colony. Anyway, I hated ungrateful people. Without Miss Cutmore, Jamila wouldn't have even heard the word 'colony'. (*Buddha* 53)

Jamila, without the influence of a white authority figure and in the face of the racist attitudes held by most of the white people around her, reinterprets her Eurocentric education along postcolonial lines and thoroughly rejects it, while Karim continues to see Miss Cutmore's lessons as empowering rather than objectifying. His defence of Miss Cutmore in the face of Jamila's rejection demonstrates his continued investment in mainstream Englishness.

Both Karim and Jamila abandon their British educations. Karim becomes rootless and eventually regrets his decision to abandon his Eurocentric education when he becomes involved with Eleanor: “When I did think of myself in comparison with those in Eleanor’s crowd, I became aware that I knew nothing; I was empty, an intellectual void” (*Buddha* 177). Karim’s self-reflection is from a lower-class English perspective, not a specifically South Asian or immigrant point-of-view. His self-criticism is based on his membership in the working class: “What idiots we were! How misinformed! Why didn’t we see that we were happily condemning ourselves to being nothing better than motor-mechanics” (*Buddha* 178). Karim here is speaking of the entire English working class (a social class still dominated by a white majority in the 1970s) rather than a specific racial group within that class. Jamila, on the other hand, continues her dramatic self-redefinition according to radical visible-minority ideals: “Like me, she’d run right out on all that ‘old, dull, white stuff’ they taught you at school and college. But she wasn’t lazy, she was educating herself” (*Buddha* 95).

Jamila also serves as a foil for Karim in their responses to white racism. Karim does nothing to fight back, while Jamila responds with physical violence (*Buddha* 53). The racism that Karim experiences recurs throughout the novel, and despite his constant frustration, he is forced to endure it in order to succeed professionally and socially. Early in the novel, Karim is racially abused and forbidden from seeing a young white girl by her father (*Buddha* 40). He experiences copious racial slurs at school: “I was sick of being affectionately called Shitface and Curryface, and of coming home covered in spit and snot and chalk and woodshavings” (*Buddha* 63). Karim’s response is not to self-identify against his persecutors, but instead to express frustration at the disparity between his internal identity and expectations based on his skin colour: “The thing was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it” (*Buddha* 53). Here is

the central conflict for Karim; his English self-identification is constantly tested by the external reality of a white England that refuses to accept him as belonging. In spite of all the linguistic and cultural markers that mark Karim out as primarily British, it is the one marker over which he has no control, his skin colour, that causes the racist whites around him to deny him the agency to self-identify as British and to participate in Britishness. The problem here is two-fold; Karim must stop denying his Pakistani self, as it is an inescapable aspect of himself. More importantly, however, racial markers need to be subordinated to more substantial signs of cultural identification, such as language, in the eyes of the white majority.

On the eve of moving from the suburbs into central London, Karim fantasizes about what London will be like: “there were thousands of black people everywhere, so I wouldn’t feel exposed” (Kureishi *Buddha* 121). However, despite the more multicultural makeup of the city, Karim begins to experience a different kind of racism, one intimately connected to his success as an actor. Instead of being overtly insulted, he has stereotypical expectations imposed upon him by the affluent and influential white Englishmen who give him roles in their theatre productions. The first of these is Shadwell, who casts Karim as Mowgli in a stage production of *The Jungle Book*, whose racist expectations are evident from Karim’s audition.

During the audition, Shadwell expects Karim to be already aware of the racial basis of his casting and for Karim to be able to speak his “own language” (i. e. Punjabi or Urdu). The director makes it clear that the main reason for Karim’s casting is not any talent he might have but his skin colour. Shadwell is disappointed when he discovers that Karim has never been to India (*Buddha* 141). Despite Karim’s attempt to steer their conversation to the subject of acting, Shadwell continues to expound on what he perceives as Karim’s destiny: “to be a half-caste in England. That must be complicated for you to accept – belonging nowhere, wanted nowhere. Racism” (*Buddha* 141). Ironically, it is Shadwell’s own

expectations and refusal to see Karim as anything more than merely “half-caste” that produces the situation he describes; the racism Karim experiences in this situation is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. It is not some internal mechanism, an internalized strife that marks Karim as an outsider. He does not see himself as half-caste; quite the contrary, he feels at home in England despite the racism he experiences. It is Shadwell who tries to force him into this role in order to exploit him.

The production itself proves to be humiliating in its racist stereotyping. Karim is forced to wear dark full-body makeup and put on an Indian accent, by which he is embarrassed and mortified (*Buddha* 146-7). However, he remains in the production and plays the role according to Shadwell’s instructions, despite his displeasure at the racist costume and accent, because he has to in order to fulfill his desire to be a successful actor: “Despite the yellow scarf strangling my balls, the brown make-up, and even the accent, I relished being the pivot of the production” (*Buddha* 150). Herein lies the central dilemma of his vacillating identity: he is an Englishman but is constrained by his skin colour. In order to succeed as he sees it (to become the centre of attention, to be the “pivot” of the production) he has to accede to racial stereotypes, reconstructing himself according to white expectations of his Indianness.

After Karim’s debut performance as Mowgli, Jamila confronts him and expresses the same disgust he feels for the racist elements of the play: “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”? (*Buddha* 157) Karim’s unspoken motivation to continue the performance, in spite of its pandering to prejudices, is that he sees himself as having no choice; if he wants to succeed as an actor, he has to take the parts given, and the only parts given by the white men who control the theatre are those that conform to

racial stereotypes. In order to participate in Britishness via socioeconomic success, Karim must distance himself from his internal British identity by conforming to those stereotypes.

Karim must continue to conform to these expectations as his acting career unfolds. When he is offered a part in the esteemed fringe director Matthew Pyke's next production, one of his fellow *Jungle Book* actors decries his success: "If I weren't white and middle class I'd have been in Pyke's show now. Obviously mere talent gets you nowhere these days. Only the disadvantaged are going to succeed in seventies' England" (*Buddha* 165). The accusation that Karim has been cast primarily for his race rather than his acting ability is proven true when the troupe starts to develop the show. Karim's first instinct is to represent his successful white friend Charlie in Pyke's play, but the director refuses him, saying that he has to choose someone from his own background, someone "black" (*Buddha* 170). Karim's Englishman-derived reaction is to think, "I didn't know anyone black, though I'd been at school with a Nigerian" (*Buddha* 170). Whether interpreted as irony or naïveté, Karim's reaction to Pyke's demand that his character be black demonstrates that Karim sees himself not as black but as English, but that others (especially those in authority) see him as black and not English, and if he is to succeed, he must reconstruct himself according to those expectations.

The first role Karim proposes to the troupe is a representation of Anwar, but this character is roundly rejected by the only other black member of the cast for showing black people as irrational, ridiculous and hysterical (*Buddha* 180) and he is forced to choose a different character. His second choice is Tariq, a character based on Jamila's Indian husband Changez, who is as stereotypical as Karim's first choice according to Tracey (the other black member of the cast). Pyke, however, sees how Tariq can be integrated into a cross-class plot and so overrides Tracy's protests and accepts the character enthusiastically (*Buddha* 189). For Karim, Tariq is more than just a role to be played; he is the Indian past that Karim invents

for himself. For all his self-proclaimed Englishness, Karim had participated to a degree in South Asian cultural practices, especially when he had interacted with Jamila and her parents. Whenever he had visited them, Karim had participated in their family activities, eating kebabs and walking on Anwar's wife Jeeta's back (*Buddha* 52). These activities are not particularly incompatible with Karim's English identity, but together with his lack of emphasis on how different they are from the activities of white contemporaries, they constitute an element of Karim's identity that is distinctly Indian.

These activities had stopped when Karim had moved to central London and pulled away from the few Indian roots he had, namely Changez, Jamila, Anwar and Jeeta. When they first see each other after the move, Changez accuses Karim of leaving his "people" behind (*Buddha* 136). Karim, however, does not have a conspicuous sense of any Indian identity he might possess until after Anwar's death. At Anwar's funeral, he has his first real inkling of a potential Indian heritage and identity:

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 the 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. He was honest about this: he preferred England in every way. Things worked; it wasn't hot; you didn't see terrible things on the street that you could do nothing about. He wasn't proud of his past, but he wasn't unproud of it either; it just existed, and there wasn't any point in fetishizing it, as some liberals and Asian radicals liked to do. So if I wanted the additional personality bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it. (*Buddha* 213)

Karim desires an Indian past, but he is thoroughly English; the tags of an Indian identity he collects while interacting with Jamila and her family are too piecemeal, and he feels that he has received no cultural inheritance from his father. His desire for an Indian past does not replace his desire to remold himself according to white standards; he wants to obtain the two identities simultaneously, and the Indian identity is placed in a subordinate position to the

English by the term “additional personality bonus.” It is no wonder that, after the funeral, it is with Changez and Jamila that Karim feels most at home, even though they are distinctly different from him (one a true Indian immigrant, the other a dissatisfied leftist radical): “It was only with these two that I felt part of a family” (*Buddha* 214).

The Indian past Karim invents for himself is his character Tariq: “There were few jobs I relished as much as the invention of Changez/Tariq” (*Buddha* 217). Tariq, however, turns out to be a “wretched and comic character” (*Buddha* 220) rather than any kind of stereotype-defying image of an Indian. By the end of the novel, Karim has begun to identify himself as something other than an Englishman. Pyke takes the show to New York, where Karim is once again singled out for the colour of his skin: he and Tracy are selected by their American host to be the centre of a Haitian dancing spectacle, during which Karim feels “like a colonial watching the natives perform” (*Buddha* 244). Disheartened by the racist bent of his career, Karim chooses to remain in New York after the play ends, and begins to reflect more on his relationship with his father and his father’s immigrant past:

Dad had always felt superior to the British: this was the legacy of his Indian childhood – political anger turned 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. (*Buddha* 250)

This new sense of identity is distinctly in opposition to stereotypical views of the English, especially the English as colonial masters. Karim begins to see his desire for success in spite of the racism he faces as a kind of response to that racism, the same racism that drove Eleanor’s previous West Indian lover Gene to suicide:

Sweet Gene, her black lover, London’s best mime, who emptied bed-pans in hospital soaps, killed himself because every day, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being. And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all

its self-regard – into the eye of Hairy Back, into the eye of the Great Fucking Dane. 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? (*Buddha* 227)

With these new realizations, Karim returns to England to accept a part in a television soap opera that will make him famous; however, racism is inescapable. Karim's final acting job is similar to his others in that it is racially driven: he is to play "the rebellious student son of an Indian shopkeeper" in a soap opera focusing on "contemporary issues... abortions and racist attacks" (*Buddha* 259) In addition, the first white person to address Karim when he returns to London from New York is a dentist who, on first seeing the young actor, asks his nurse whether Karim speaks English (*Buddha* 258). Karim may have begun to pull away from a limiting, inflexible social construction of identity, but the external pressures of stereotypical racial expectations are inescapable.

Karim is, of course, not the only character in the novel struggling with racist threats to his personal identity. A considerable portion of the narrative is dedicated to discussing Karim's father Haroon and Haroon's friend Anwar, whose situations are the obverse of Karim's: where Karim is a second-generation immigrant, born and raised in England and self-identifying as English, Haroon and Anwar are first generation immigrants who largely reject English socio-cultural values in favour of a diasporic Indian identity. Both Haroon and Anwar come from wealthy Muslim families in Bombay (*Buddha* 23-24). As wealthy and educated colonials, they had certain expectations before arriving in London, but the realities of Britain come as "a freezing shock to both of them" (*Buddha* 24). The difference between their imagined England and the England they discover is particularly hard on Haroon, who does more to try to assimilate to his new environment by expounding on English literature. However, he is thoroughly rebuffed by a generally hostile English culture: "And when Dad

tried to discuss Byron in local pubs no one warned him that not every Englishman could read or that they didn't necessarily want tutoring by an Indian on the poetry of a pervert and a madman" (*Buddha* 24-25). The elements of English culture that Haroon learned of prior to his arrival in England prove to be of little use when he is faced with the realities of lower-middle-class culture in suburban London.

The racism that Haroon faces is bound up with his professional life. He sees racism at the heart of his lack of success as a clerk: "The whites will never promote us...Not an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth...they still think they have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together" (*Buddha* 27). He has to change his route walking to work on occasion "for fear of having stones and ice-pops full of piss lobbed at him by schoolboys" (*Buddha* 28). This racism and continued rejection from participation in English cultural norms and professional success lead Haroon to abandon his attempt at assimilation and retreat into a constructed Oriental identity as the titular Buddha of suburbia. This identity is inevitably inauthentic, constructed according to Western ideas of Orientalism gleaned from books on Buddhism, Sufism, Confucianism, and Zen from "the Oriental bookshop in Cecil Court, off Charing Cross Road" (*Buddha* 5). Haroon concentrates on Buddhist meditation practices, despite the fact that he is from a Muslim family. He transforms himself into an Indian stereotype: "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" (*Buddha* 21). His performances are for white, upper-middle-class, suburban Britons such as Carl and Marianne, who have co-opted and commodified Indian culture and philosophy and "stood barefoot at the door 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" and

whose home is filled with “sandalwood Buddhas, brass ashtrays and striped plaster elephants which decorated every available space” (*Buddha* 30). Thus Haroon does his best to reject Englishness in favour of what he perceives as Indianness, but an Indianness based not on his own experiences of India but on white stereotypes of what India should be. In the end, however, he begins to regret his rejection of suburban English life and longs to return to Karim’s mother (*Buddha* 281).

This pattern, of first attempting to assimilate into, or at least participate in, white English culture, only to be rebuffed by racism and return to an imagined India, is shared by Haroon and Anwar, and although their methods of return are different, their motivations are the same:

Maybe there were similarities between what was happening to Dad, with his discovery of Eastern philosophy, and Anwar’s last stand. Perhaps it was the immigrant condition living itself out through them. For years they were both happy to live like Englishmen. Anwar even scoffed pork pies as long as Jeeta wasn’t looking... Now, as they aged and seemed settled here, Anwar and Dad appeared to be returning internally to India, or at least resisting the English here. It was puzzling: neither of them expressed any desire actually to see their origins again. (*Buddha* 64)

Anwar had also tried to adopt English practices upon his arrival in England. As a young man, he frequented the prostitutes in Hyde Park, and drank alcohol with Haroon (*Buddha* 25). But the racism faced by his family forces him back into Muslim essentialism. Karim describes this extreme racism at length:

The area in which Jamila lived was closer to London than our suburbs, and far poorer. It was full of neo-fascist groups, thugs who had their own pubs and clubs and shops. On Saturdays they’d be out in the High Street selling their newspapers and pamphlets. They also operated outside the schools and colleges and football grounds, like Millwall and Crystal Palace. At night they roamed the streets, beating Asians and shoving shit and burning rags through their letter-boxes. Frequently the mean, white, hating faces had public meetings and the Union Jacks were paraded through the streets, protected by the police. Here was no evidence that these people would go away – no evidence that their power would diminish rather than increase. The lives of Anwar and Jeeta and Jamila were pervaded by fear of violence. I’m sure it was something they thought about every day. (*Buddha* 56)

Convinced that his daughter is meeting boys while exercising in the morning (these exercises are themselves a response to the pressures of racism, Jamila's preparation for what she sees as an inevitable war between the races), Anwar arranges a husband from India for her (*Buddha* 57). When she refuses to go along with the arranged marriage, Anwar tries to reinforce his traditional authority by emulating Gandhi in a hunger strike (*Buddha* 60). When Karim protests, saying that arranged marriages are out-of-date and that people in contemporary Britain are free to marry whom they choose, Anwar responds, "That is not our way, boy. Our way is firm," (*Buddha* 60). Despite his apparent partial assimilation to an English way-of-life, Anwar rejects what he perceives as English and embraces an inflexible and essentialist system of Muslim patriarchal authority. Karim in particular is surprised by this dramatic change in Anwar's self-perception: "It was certainly bizarre, Uncle Anwar behaving like a Muslim. I'd never known him believe in anything before, so it was an amazing novelty to find him literally staking his life on the principle of absolute patriarchal authority" (*Buddha* 64).

Anwar is eventually destroyed by this expectation of deference to parental and gender authority. He forces Jamila to comply with an arranged marriage, but his son-in-law turns out to be both completely uninterested in taking over the family business and physically disabled. Changez "was such a disappointment that Anwar – who had been counting on being given a life-transfusion by a son – had become an old man, his natural course of decay being accelerated, not delayed, by the fresh element which had turned out to be not-so-fresh" (*Buddha* 170).

Eventually, Anwar does want to return to India, but Jeeta refuses (*Buddha* 172). Hated by his family for his authoritarian impositions, Anwar further deteriorates, sinking into alcoholism (*Buddha* 208). He is eventually killed by the product of his absolutist reaction to the

pressures of racism: the very son-in-law whom he forced on his family in an attempt to ratify his Muslim dominance ends up fatally injuring Anwar with an enormous dildo (*Buddha* 210-11).

How then are we to read the transformations of Karim, Haroon, and Anwar? In Karim, Kureishi represents the second-generation immigrant, deeply immersed in English culture and self-identifying as an Englishman, who is unable to realize fully his English identity because of the pressures of racism. This second-generation immigrant is able to find personal and professional success, but only by reproducing the racist expectations of white authority figures and allowing race to be his defining feature. In Haroon and Anwar, Kureishi represents the first-generation immigrant, whose initial intention to adapt and participate is quashed by racism, and who turns back to an unstable, artificial or essentialized “homeland” which offers, in the end, little to no solace at best, and complete disillusionment and destruction at worst. Is this, then, the message of Kureishi’s novel: that only biracial, second-generation immigrants have a chance of succeeding in multicultural England, and then only according to predetermined racial stereotypes?

Identification of the central thematic thrust of *The Buddha of Suburbia* is necessary in order to determine whether this is the final message the novel offers to its readers. Bruce King believes that the novel “is not primarily about identity, but about desire and liberation and their costs” and that Karim “is not a product of cultural conflict like his father” but is rather “a product of the cultural revolution of the 1960s of pop music, instant fame, sexual freedom, drugs, multiracialism, multiculturalism” (King 89). Brian Finney, however, states that “the novel represents the pursuit of pleasure as itself a way of freeing the self from the constraints of a racist, materialist and tradition-bound society” (Finney 125). The pursuit of pleasure, of “action and sexual interest,” is by these lights not Karim’s primary concern or activity: according to Finney, it is a means to an end, that of self-definition. Karim’s initial

desire for “mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs” is inextricably bound up with his desire to be transformed into Charlie.

King’s emphasis on pleasure over identity is further problematized by the distinction he draws between Karim’s experiences and those of his father, Haroon. How can Karim not be identified as a product of cultural conflict? How can a line be drawn between Karim’s father’s world and the world Karim inhabits, when King himself mentions the new form that cultural conflict has taken in the world of the novel, namely multiracialism and multiculturalism? Of course, Karim is not directly the product of the same cultural conflict as his father, who arrives in England from Pakistan in 1950 (*Buddha* 6) shortly after independence and partition, and who is shaped directly by the colonizer/colonized dichotomy of Britain and colonial India. Instead, Karim is shaped by its later expression in multicultural Britain: the cultural conflict is expressed within the former Imperial metropolis itself, but is still founded on the same racism, classism, and religious divisions that marked Haroon’s conflict. The location and scale may have changed, and the issues may have become more complex, but the prejudices and consequent conflict remain much the same.

Finney, on the other hand, places thematic emphasis on Karim’s search for identity, and in discussing that search he sees a plastic, fluid, mixed and ever-changing identity as the final goal of Karim’s progression: “If Karim learns anything in the course of this novel it is that seeking to fix one’s sense of identity in any one position, whether that is national, ethnic, religious, or political, is self-defeating” (Finney 126). According to Finney, Karim’s final realization is that the self “is something we stage” (Finney 132) and that “national identity is performed, not inherent” (Finney 131). The novel does, however, present a complication to the concept of self-as-acted and the empowerment of self-as-chosen-role: according to Finney, Karim also realizes that “the overt racism he encountered in the suburbs is still

present in a much subtler and less obvious form in the avant-garde world of London's fringe theatre" (Finney 132). The self may be mutable and ever-changing, but it is still (and for Karim, whose physical appearance marks him out as different from those in social authority over him, always) subject to the exterior pressures of others' expectations. Racism, as an extreme form of social expectation, has a severe impact on the potential roles that Karim can take on; he can only succeed by surrendering to them, at least in part. The constant vacillation, between Karim's inner English identity and the external Indian roles that he must assume in order to succeed professionally, certainly supports Finney's interpretation, especially Karim's seeming realization that he need not be exclusively English or Indian, but can choose, under the right circumstances, to be either, both, or neither (as occurs during his trip to New York). The novel's ending, however, calls the notion of role-as-empowerment into question.

The novel's final scene takes place on the eve of the May 4, 1979 election, in which the Conservatives under Thatcher took power from the Labour Party (*Buddha* 282). According to Finney, in this final scene, "The narrator knows what the protagonist cannot yet see – that the 1970s are about to give way to a decade in which three successive Thatcher governments are destined to transform Britain – into a climate of individual enterprise but also of racism and exceptionally high unemployment" (Finney 137). Karim's final statement of optimism, "I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn't always be that way" (*Buddha* 284), implies positive change, but of course, the reader knows better. The most significant change coming for England is the rise of neo-conservatism and an upsurge in racist sentiments. For Karim, this also means the end of publicly-subsidized theatre in Britain.

In addition, the final word on race in the novel is given not to the optimistic Karim, but to his younger brother Allie (*Buddha* 267-8). Allie appears only intermittently in the novel,

a minor presence rather than a fully realized character, and it is not until the end that he speaks or is discussed at length. In his final conversation with Karim, however, the newly mature Allie, with his immaculate garb and European clothing-design job, demonstrates a distinctly neo-conservative attitude towards race: he extols the virtue of material gain at the expense of political participation, and expresses distaste for left-wing politics and for his fellow visible minorities: “We all hate whingeing lefties, don’t we? ... Their clothes look like rags. And I hate people who go on all the time about being black, and how persecuted they were at school, and how someone spat on them once. You know: self-pity” (*Buddha* 267).

When Karim tries to tell his brother about his most recent experience with racism, to dissuade him from denying the dangers of racism not only for first-generation immigrants but for their biracial children as well, Allie cuts him off, saying: “no one put people like you and me in camps, and no one will. We can’t be lumped in with them, thank God” (*Buddha* 268). Karim’s experiences, however, contradict this wishful statement. Despite his biracial inheritance and his intimate relationship with English culture, the expectations of the whites around him do constantly “lump him in” with other visible minorities.

Finney’s positive interpretation that “the relative lack of closure Kureishi employs in this novel reflects the fact that nothing is settled, neither nationally nor personally for Karim” (Finney 137), and that this openness serves to empower Karim by providing space for choice, is undermined by the reality that, at the end of the novel, Britain is about to enter a socio-political era of neo-conservatism that will entrench the power of limiting racist expectations over the minority population, and reinforce and compound the racism Karim has already experienced. Immediately following their election in 1979, the Thatcher conservatives passed new immigration rules that further restricted the entry of Commonwealth dependants into Britain, and by January 1981 they passed a new Nationality Act that removed the right to

British citizenship from a significant number of Commonwealth citizens who had previously been classified as British citizens, further alienating former colonial subjects who had been previously told that they were full participants in the British colonial project (Brown).

Karim may have made advances towards delimiting his identity and resisting external racist pressures that seek to restrict his self-definition and socio-economic success, but the period he is about to enter has the potential to undo the growth he has achieved. In addition, Karim's relative success when presented alongside Haroon's and Anwar's disillusionment, failure and, in Anwar's case, death in the face of a racist British society implies that the freedom of a delimited, black "self" is reserved, at best, for the second- and subsequent-generation immigrant, and, perhaps, only for those fortunate enough to be of biracial descent. In the latter case, this implies a quasi-biological link to successful navigation between national identities, and that national or ethnic identities are inherent rather than performed. For a more positive (but still problematic) representation of these crises of immigrant identity, we will have to investigate Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000) and her biracial protagonist Irie Jones.

3. Irie Jones and the Perfect Blankness of the Past: Black and British Identities in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* shares many elements with Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, not the least of which is a central protagonist with a biracial background struggling to reconcile seemingly conflicting black and British identities in the face of external racist expectations. I will suggest that Smith provides a positive vision of British multiculturalism, while simultaneously posting warning signs against the dangers of dependence on essentialist readings of ethnicity and culture when trying to establish a space for self-definition in a contemporary, multicultural society. Smith represents the potential success of establishing such a space through the experiences and conclusions of Irie Jones, while the dangers of essentialism are played out through the characters of Magid, Samad, and Millat Iqbal. *White Teeth* is an excellent example of the kind of contemporary fiction that Pirjo Ahokas lauds for creating "interstitial spaces which serve as sites for openly claiming postmodern multiple identities" (Ahokas 115).

By establishing Irie Jones as free of defined or limiting national identities at the novel's conclusion, Smith consciously favours those voices in the heterogeneous multicultural discourse that articulate something more malleable than the mutual exclusivity of an assimilationist or diasporic identity dependent on a binary division between "British" and "other." In *White Teeth*, the only character to free herself from the dangerous notion of a permanent or fixed identity is Irie; her contemporaries, Millat and Magid Iqbal, and their first-generation South Asian immigrant father, Samad, all bind themselves to fixed self-conceptions, which inevitable fail when confronted with the pressures of postcolonial Britain.

In order to understand what separates Irie from the other, less successfully self-defined characters in the novel, we must first come to some kind of consensus as to the

definition of the two methods of identity formation implicit in the novel: assimilation and diaspora. The “assimilation response” is the outcome whereby a person of colour living in a society dominated by “white” ideals (and that offers according to Molly Thompson “few images with which to identify” [Thompson 128]) chooses to abandon or deny all parts of his or her inherited ethnic identity in favour of adopting (and largely *not* adapting) elements of those white ideals. The subject of assimilation reconstructs him- or herself, both physically and psychologically, as completely as possible according to the dominant social norms of his or her adopted nation. The second essentialist possibility is what Sommer refers to as the “diasporic response”: the desire to retain the traditions and beliefs of the homeland in resistance to the influences of the subject’s adopted country (Sommer 177). Both forms of identity formation are dependent on an essentialized binary division between a society’s dominant cultural mode and what that cultural mode defines as “other,” and afford no possibility for finding a place in between. In addition, this essentialist perspective can dangerously influence even the attempt to find a place in between. Thompson describes the danger of maintaining an essentialized dichotomy between identities inherent in trying to find a position between them:

Those with ‘hyphenated’ identities, then, as well as having to encounter such racist beliefs, may find themselves having to choose between colluding with dominant social and cultural practices, thereby possibly weakening their own sense of rootedness, or rejecting the ideas of assimilation or integration altogether and remaining ‘rootless’ on society’s margins. Or they may have little choice but to inhabit the ‘in-between’ which – according to *White Teeth* – is not always an easy place to be. (Thompson 131)

In all three cases, identity formation rests on a Lacanian concept of the nation (either the adopted Britain or the ‘homeland’ of Bangladesh or Jamaica). Nick Bentley describes this conception of the nation as “a fantasy space, an imaginary body onto which individuals can project their desires of wholeness, completeness and belonging; a space that momentarily

removes the lack with which individuals are burdened by their move into the symbolic world of adulthood” (Bentley 486). Relying solely on one or the other of these fantasy spaces, or on elements of both which are held to be immutable and thus incompatible, cannot provide for a stable identity. As Tracey Walters suggests, “Smith reveals that in today’s postmodern millennial world, notions of ethnic and racial identity cannot be defined in terms of ancestry, language or culture because the hybridization of English society has made concepts of ethnicity and race indeterminate” (Walters 315). Instead, the novel proposes a means of constructing new identities that acknowledges that “interracial unions have crossed racial *and* ethnic lines” (Walters 316, emphasis in original) and which “questions the very notion of stable identities” (Sommer 166). By the end of Smith’s novel, Irie manages to push past the desire for a fixed self-conception based on one or the other national identity; instead, she abandons fixity in favour of malleability and the production of a space in which to try on new identities rather than adhering to a single one.

Smith offers an alternative for black British identity formation to Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity, which Pirjo Ahokas criticizes for “deliberately avoiding constructive, political commitments” and leaving the colonizer/colonized dichotomy “pretty much intact” (Ahokas 126). This form of cultural hybridity is more easily applied to Millat Iqbal’s identity than to Irie’s. Smith’s representation of Irie undermines and explodes any essentialist view of ethnicity and culture, contravenes the divisive binary between colonizer and colonized, and demonstrates a means of agency for the subject rather than an enforced assimilation from the top down that serves a homogeneous, hegemonic, colonizing culture. Many critics have acknowledged this as Smith’s more positive outlook. Dominic Head compares the novel to other British fictions dealing with the issue of contemporary multiculturalism: “Where Rushdie and others have worried about integration and

assimilation, Smith presents integration as a productive, two-way street” (Head 111). Citing theory by the likes of Gayatri Spivak and Linda Hutcheon, Ahokas writes that, “It is important to acknowledge that in [*White Teeth*] transnational cultural flows and transnational alliances enhance [Irie’s] agency and thereby contribute to her ongoing construction of a mobile and multiple identity” (Ahokas 126).

Smith illuminates Irie’s success by contrasting her conclusions about her place in British society with those of other characters who find themselves in similar situations, but whose own attempts at identity formation ultimately fail, largely because of their dependence on essentialist, dogmatic, or binary visions of the interrelation between ethnicities in a multicultural society and within their own identities. When contrasted with the identity formations of the three male members of the Iqbal family, Irie can be seen to escape the constraints of rigid English or Jamaican identities.⁴ Ahokas quotes theoretician Isabel Hoving, identifying that in the novel “displacement is an ambivalent term: it is a sign of loss, but also a potential for personal transformation” (Ahokas 119). Where the Iqbals feel only loss, Irie is able to find space for self-definition. Being displaced from both Britain and Jamaica by her mixed ethnic heritage and her cultural upbringing actually serves to free her from the limitations of cultural stereotyping and the expectations of both British and Jamaican society.

⁴ Contrasting the experiences of Irie with those of the male Iqbals, as well as contrasting the experiences of Irie and the twins with those of Samad, brings to the foreground the additional complications of age and gender within the process of postcolonial identity formation. Smith’s representation of second- and third-generation immigrants as being more capable of forming successful (or closer to successful) cosmopolitan identities than their first-generation counterparts is telling, and there is something even more fascinating about the seeming assertion that Irie’s gendered social position and identity give her an additional edge over the Iqbal twins in her pursuit of self-definition. Unfortunately, this project cannot go into detail on either subject, although the subject of gender is addressed in Pirjo Ahokas’s article “Transcending Binary Divisions: Constructing a Postmodern Female Urban Identity in Louise Erdrich’s *The Antelope Wife* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*.”

Through Irie, Smith explodes the essentialist binary division of assimilation or diaspora as the only possible means of identity formation for immigrants in their adopted country. Magid Iqbal represents the first of these essentialist responses: assimilation. Early in the novel, on his ninth birthday, Magid attempts to assert his desire to abandon all vestiges of his inherited culture and instead construct himself entirely according to white British standards. He does this by associating with “a group of very nice-looking white boys with meticulous manners” and Anglicizing his name when he interacts with them, referring to himself as “Mark Smith” (Smith 150-1):

Magid really wanted to be *in some other family*. He wanted to own cats and not cockroaches, he wanted his mother to make the music of the cello, not the sound of the sewing machine; he wanted to have a trellis of flowers growing up one side of the house instead of the ever growing pile of other people’s rubbish; he wanted a piano in the hallway in place of the broken door off cousin Kurshed’s car; he wanted to go on biking holidays in France, not day-trips to Blackpool to visit aunties; he wanted the floor of his room to be shiny wood, not the orange and green swirled carpet left over from the restaurant; he wanted his father to be a doctor, not a one-handed waiter; and this month Magid had concerted all these desires into a wish to join in with the Harvest Festival like Mark Smith would. Like everybody else would. (Smith 151, emphasis in original)

In desiring to be “like everybody else,” Magid wishes to be white, British, and middle class (hence his desire for hardwood floors and professional parents). He wants to shed the twin cultural inheritances from his father: his Bangladeshi origins and his place in the working classes of Britain. This desire, however, is frustrated by Samad’s intention that his son remain uncorrupted by the West, and by Magid’s eventual kidnapping and forced exile back to Bangladesh.

In exile, rather than reconstructing himself as a Bangladeshi Muslim, as his father hopes, Magid embarks on a mission of self-transformation into the next best thing to a member of the white British middle-class, the “quintessential Anglo-Indian” (Head 112): he becomes deferential to British colonial values, dismissive of local cultural practices and

points-of-view, and a proponent of reform according to British colonial standards and practices. To his father's chagrin, Magid associates with and idolizes Sir R. V. Saraswati, the Indian author whom Samad describes as "a Rule-Britannia-worshipping Hindu old Queen" (Smith 289).

When Magid eventually comes into contact with the Chalfens, he further invests in British middle-class values and decides to return to London to study English law: 'in the words of his father, "to enforce the laws of man rather than the laws of God" (Smith 406). Magid becomes the Bengali mirror image of Marcus Chalfen, a third generation Jewish immigrant for whom the scientific/psychiatric values of middle-class Britain have "long supplanted Judaism" (Smith 313), investing whole-heartedly in his and his family's brand of dominant cultural ideology: Chalfenism. As Magid tells Irie after his return to London: "I have converted to Life. I see his [Millat's] god in the millionth position of *pi*, in the arguments of Phaedrus, in a perfect paradox" (Smith 429). He expunges the last vestiges of his inherited Muslim identity when, upon his return to London, he visits his father's favorite place to eat, O'Connell's Pool House, and breaks its most sacred rule, and the last trace of its proprietor's own Muslim identity, of no pork by ordering a bacon sandwich (Smith 450).

Magid's new identity is ultimately unstable because it is intrinsically linked to that of the Chalfens. The Chalfen identity is based on essentialist assumptions about British identity: as Ahokas points out, they consider themselves representative of "liberal mainstream Britishness ... the 'inheritors of the enlightenment, the creators of the welfare state, the intellectual elite and the source of all culture'" (Ahokas 121-2). But this position is as untenable as Samad's: Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse project, which from his narrow viewpoint can be seen as simply beneficial to all mankind, proves to be offensive to other communities within postcolonial Britain (especially other essentialist/fundamentalist groups

such as KEVIN and the Jehovah's Witnesses), leading to a scene of civil unrest and violence. According to Head, in the climactic scene of the novel, Smith "explodes the stereotypical middle-class Englishness of the Chalfens" (Head 114): Marcus Chalfen's mentor is revealed to be a former French Nazi and war criminal, and the FutureMouse project is ended by an act of violence perpetrated by Millat.

Irie initially shares Magid's desire for assimilation. She joins him in protesting Samad's insistence that they not attend the school's Harvest Festival for fear that it will have an undue influence on them (Smith 149); like Magid, Irie wishes to participate and be "like everybody else." This relatively early moment of desire for conformity foreshadows two larger and more significant moments in Irie's life: her desire to alter her physical appearance in line with white British concepts of beauty and her strong desire to become one of the Chalfens.

After Magid's exile, Irie becomes determined to alter her physical appearance in order to conform better to white British standards of beauty, as well as to win the affection of Millat Iqbal. Despite her mixed heritage, Irie does not measure up to the physical standards prescribed by the world around her: "The European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes and guavas; the girl had weight" (Smith 265). Smith emphasizes Irie's non-British attributes by comparing her body to tropical fruits. In an attempt to conform, Irie subjects herself to "belly reducing knickers," a "breast reducing bra" and "meticulous lycra corseting – the much lauded nineties answer to whalebone" (Smith 265). Because she does not conform to culturally established ideals, Irie cannot identify with the society around her, and despite her best intentions she seems unable to construct an identity using the tools at hand: "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a strange land" (Smith 266). She is denied a possible source of

identification within the British cultural canon when her attempt to interpret the female subject of a Shakespearean sonnet as Afro-Caribbean is criticized by her high school English teacher (Smith 271-2). All hope of self-actualization seems stymied by the incompatibility of her appearance and the cultural expectations imposed upon her: “And this belief in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*, had subdued her” (Smith 268, emphasis in original).

Irie attempts to transform her appearance and identity by straightening her hair. Her actions are more than merely an attempt to conform physically to British social “norms.” Molly Thompson sees Irie’s actions as highly political: “Given that ‘Afro’s’ have been used as a statement of rebellion against ‘white’ ideological values by many, [...] Irie’s desire to change her ‘Afro’ hairstyle enters the political arena” (Thompson 126). At this point in the novel, Irie is so heavily invested in constructing her identity in line with white British norms that she wants to expunge all traces of her Jamaican ethnicity. Thompson sees Irie’s desire for physical conformity as her attempt to exorcise those elements of her identity (both physical and psychological) that are taken from her Jamaican ancestry, instead desiring to assert those of her British ancestry:

Inhabiting a body that is physiologically rooted in two places, ‘belonging’ to both England and Jamaica in a sense, she experiences a kind of corporeal nomadism or a not-at-homeness in her own skin [...] Irie’s wish to change her Afro hairstyle, as well as minimize her ‘Jamaican proportions’ could be read as a metaphorical denial of part of her cultural origin. (Thompson 127-8)

If we are to accept Thompson’s reading of Irie’s attempt to straighten her hair as a metaphor for the attempted denial of cultural origins in order to reconstruct self according to dominant white ideals, then what is the significance of Irie’s mixed heritage in relation to that metaphor? After all, the novel clearly describes the desire for straight hair felt by women of colour regardless of whether they are of mixed ethnicity or not:

Here, the impossible desire for straightness and ‘movement’ fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission.

‘Is it straight?’ was the only question you heard as the towels came off and the heads emerged from the drier pulsating with pain. ‘Is it straight Denise? Tell me is it straight, Jackie?’ (Smith 275)

Irie’s transformation is merely superficial, damaging, and ultimately futile. When other women attempt the same transformation, “they all came out straight or straight enough. But they also came out dead. Dry. Splintered. Stiff. All the spring gone. Like the hair of a cadaver as the moisture seeps away” (Smith 276). The outcome for Irie is worse: the process of straightening destroys her hair, forcing her to undergo “an arduous operation that involved plaiting somebody else’s hair in small sections to Irie’s own two inches and sealing it with glue” (Smith 282). In the end, however, this false hair, initially so appealing to Irie thanks to its straightness and the hint of red in its colouring, is scoffed at by Millat’s cousin Neena and Neena’s girlfriend Maxine, who offer her the alternative viewpoint that her original hair was more attractive; worse, it is so hastily done that the hair falls out at the merest touch, before Irie has a chance to show it to Millat (Smith 283-4). These events can be interpreted as representative of the destructiveness of attempting a quick and superficial form of assimilation. Such a hastily constructed identity can fall apart at the first pressure put upon it by alternative points of view within the multicultural landscape, leaving nothing behind, as any elements of the previous or alternate identity must have already been expunged, just as Irie’s hair must be either killed or completely destroyed before it can be straightened.

It is telling that, upon the failure of her first hair weave, Irie does not return to P.K.’s to receive a second, nor does she attempt to straighten her hair again once it has grown out. Her desire to conform to white ideals, in terms of both beauty and cultural values or

practices, seems lessened but by no means completely eradicated, and a second strong desire to conform, to transform herself in the image of those same white values, is sparked by her encounter with the Chalfens.

When Irie is first introduced to the Chalfen household she is immediately struck by the enormous difference between their social interactions and those of her own family: “She’d never been so *close* to this strange and beautiful thing, the *middle class*, and experienced the kind of embarrassment that is actually intrigue, fascination” (Smith 321, emphasis in original). Indeed, she is so impressed by them that she literally wishes to become a member of their family, their ethnicity, their class: “she *wanted* to merge with the Chalfens, to be of one flesh; separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and transgenically fused with another” (Smith 342, emphasis in original). Irie desires to be physiologically transformed into a member of the Chalfen clan, separated physically from her black racial identity (the “chaotic, random flesh of her own family”), but this dramatic transformation is, of course, impossible. Instead, she must rely on an imitation of behaviour in order to insinuate herself into the Chalfen family unit, a process which does not produce its desired result.

This new identity formation proves untenable once again. Irie reconstructs her behavioural identity to mirror the Chalfens, but the further she progresses in her project of assimilation, the more she is rejected by them: “The more progress Irie made – whether in her studies, her attempts to make polite conversation or her studied imitation of Chalfenism – the less interest Joyce showed in her” (Smith 334). Rejected by Joyce for attempting to overstep what Ahokas refers to as the “unequal relationship which secures the privileges associated with whiteness” (Ahokas 122), Irie turns to Marcus as her mentor in Chalfenism, but is soon passed over for Magid. Her final rejection comes in a letter that Marcus writes to Magid and which Irie reads while doing Marcus’s filing:

Sadly, I don't hold out much hope for her aspirations in the field of 'hard science', more specifically in my own biotechnology, which she appears to have her heart set on ... she's sharp in a way, but it's the menial work, the hard grafting, that she's good at – she'd make a lab assistant maybe, but she hasn't any head for the concepts, no head at all. She could try medicine, I suppose, but even then you need a little more chutzpah than she's got ... so it might have to be dentistry for our Irie...
(Smith 368, emphasis in original)

Rejected by Joyce and relegated to the lower end of the middle-class professional spectrum by Marcus, Irie does not give up entirely on her ambitions for self-assertion and success in building an identity using components from white British middle-class culture. Instead, she adapts:

In the end, Irie wasn't offended. She had the sniffles for a while, but they soon passed. She was like her mother, like her father – a great reinventor of herself, a great make-doer [...] Irie wasn't so upset. She just thought, right: dentistry. I'll be a dentist. Dentistry. Right. (Smith 368)

Although Irie is allowed only circumscribed elements of the dominant white culture, she does not reject it outright. Instead, she adapts it and makes it her own, stepping into the role assigned to her by Marcus Chalfen's racist expectations. But she does so consciously in order to succeed in her assimilative enterprise. She plans to attend university and become a dentist, while her other plan, to take a year off in South Asia and Africa, emulates Joshua Chalfen and would provide her with a chance to discover some of her non-British ethnic roots (Smith 376-7). Irie's attempts at self-transformation according to white standards eventually lead her to a point-of-view beyond adherence to one identity or the other, but to adaptation, mutability, and constant and empowering redefinition.

Samad Iqbal represents the second of the aforementioned binary positions, Sommer's diasporic response. His movement from an initial point of participation in dominant British culture to rejection of it in favour of a return to his essentialized homeland in the face of racist treatment recalls Haroon and Anwar in Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Prevented from fulfilling his desire to become a great military hero like his beloved ancestor Mangal

Pande (or at least Pande as Samad sees him) and disillusioned with his life in London, Samad wishes to reject the cultural pressures around him and find a secure and empowered identity in Bangladeshi culture; as he tells his fellow waiter: "I don't wish to be a modern man! I wish to live as I was always meant to! I wish to return to the East!" (Smith 145). This statement demonstrates Samad's essentialist perspective: there is an inherent and unchanging lifestyle that he is meant to experience by virtue of his ethnicity, and this lifestyle is incompatible with the expectations and pressures of the dominant culture of Britain (that of the "modern man"). This is more than a mere clash between cultures across time or space; he sees his preferred cultural practices as eternal, as having always been and always being applicable, despite surrounding circumstances. They cannot take into account Samad's own circumstances as a South Asian man living in Britain, nor those of his son, whose return to Bangladesh makes him an adherent not to these "traditions" but to British colonial values: "To Samad [...] tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles [...] You got nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums" (Smith 193). To Samad, the cultural spectrum is unrepentantly black and white.

This essentialist perspective is untenable, as Samad is shaped by the Britain around him despite his best intentions and belief in an unchanging and unchangeable core essence within himself. He cannot help but adopt cultural elements from his surroundings, slowly assimilating elements of white British cultural practice. He invests in two English phrases, "To the pure all things are pure" and "Can't say fairer than that," in an attempt to protect himself from thoughts and desires that are impure and repellent according to his Muslim values (Smith 137). It is particularly telling that he turns not to a component of his own tradition when faced with the stresses of his sexual desire for his son's white schoolteacher,

but instead falls back on behaviours and values he learned in Britain; in trying to protect himself from what he sees as the corrupting influence of the West, he falls further into those same practices, values, and beliefs that he is trying to protect himself from. Samad's speech is also influenced by British culture: even as he complains of the evils of immigration to England his voice betrays "the English inflections of twenty years in this country" (Smith 407).

Eventually, he determines that his own identity has been too corrupted by Britain: "you have made a devil's pact ... it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere" (Smith 407). At first, Samad invests his desire for purity in his favoured son, Magid, whom he sends back to Bangladesh to protect him from the corruption of assimilation (Smith 190). But, as Anwar's attempt to enforce his essentialized notion of Muslim patriarchal authority on his family ultimately led to his downfall, so too does Samad's desperate plan backfire when Magid returns from his exile, in Samad's own words, "more English than the English" (Smith 406). Samad's sons cannot escape the influences of Britain any more than their father can. According to Ashley Dawson, "the absolute separation between East and West that Samad dreams of is an illusion, and even after he separates them his sons are constantly constructing new identities based on composites of the interpenetrating cultures of East and West" which "satirizes Samad's belief in cultural determinism as well as his dogmatic pride in lineage by depicting the unexpected maturation of the separated twins" (Dawson 164). His desired identity shattered, Samad falls into despair:

And you begin to give up on the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie ... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter? (Smith 407, emphasis in original)

The very elements of the world around him that throw Samad into despair provide Irie with the freedom to establish her own space for self-actualization and identity construction: “As Samad described this dystopia with a look of horror, Irie was ashamed to find that the land of accidents sounded like paradise to her. Sounded like freedom” (Smith 408).

Irie’s reaction to Samad’s despair is informed by her own experiences while seeking her Jamaican roots. Frustrated in her attempt at reconstructing herself according to white standards, and in her attempts to secure permission from her mother to take her year off to travel abroad, Irie escapes to her grandmother’s apartment. Once there, she begins to explore her Jamaican heritage. This is not to say, however, that Irie is dominated by her grandmother’s identity or by her own newly-discovered ethnic past. For one thing, Irie successfully avoids being drawn into Hortense’s Jehovah’s Witness faith: “Clara needn’t have feared. Irie’s atheism was robust. It was Chalfenist in its confidence, and she approached her stay with Hortense with detached amusement” (Smith 395). Irie uses a previously assimilated position from middle-class Britain to protect herself from being drawn too far into her grandmother’s fundamentalist dogma.

While at her grandmother’s apartment, Irie begins to collect pieces of the Bowden past, both literally and figuratively:

She laid claim to the past – her version of the past – aggressively, as if retrieving misdirected mail. So *this* was where she came from. This all *belonged* to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and bobs (birth certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) and storing them under the sofa, so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her. (Smith 400, emphasis in original)

Irie’s attraction to her “homeland” is significantly different from that of Samad. Where Samad sees Bangladesh as a place of rootedness, of unchanging and essential identity, Irie is attracted to Jamaica because it represents freedom. To Irie, Jamaica represents

[...] a place where things simply *were*. No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs – this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have not passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that is sounded like a beginning. (Smith 402, emphasis in original)

The Jamaica that Irie constructs from the stories and artifacts she discovers in her grandmother's apartment gives her a place of temporary respite, but her identity cannot rest in it: her Jamaica is a “magical fantasy”, and “every time Irie felt herself closer to it, to the perfect blankness of the past, something of the present would ring the Bowden doorbell and intrude” (Smith 402). Irie's discovery of her family's past allows her to resist the discrimination and racism of the dominant white culture (Ahokas 122-123) by letting her see that there is an alternative that she can choose to subscribe to. But she cannot live within its confines indefinitely (as Samad expects he can within his own imagined homeland) because the reality of the London in which she lives will always find a way through.

Irie's final step toward opening a space for self-determination is her sexual encounter with Millat after his brother's return. Her fantasy homeland cannot stand up to the reality of her social and familial connections in the here and now, the lives that surround her that are “stranger than fiction, funnier than fiction, crueller than fiction, and with consequences fiction can never have” (Smith 459). Her sexual encounters with Millat, and later with Magid, propel her out of her constructed Jamaican cocoon, but she is able to retain the “perfect blankness of the past”; after sleeping with Magid, Irie receives a “kiss on the forehead that felt like a baptism” (Smith 463), which can be read as the author's sign that Irie has finally moved beyond an essentialist, binary vision of her identity. This baptism, rather than wiping clean her sins, wipes clean her past, giving her the space to try on different roles.

Millat Iqbal shares features in common with both his father and his brother. He wants to construct his identity using elements from both East and West. In this way he comes

the closest to establishing a space of malleability and flexibility among the male Iqbals, but ultimately his attempt at identity formation fails because he too is dependent on an essentialist and dogmatic perception of culture.

Initially, Millat is highly successful in establishing a space for personal construction and agency. He begins the novel as the ostensible leader of the Raggastanis, a gang “manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel” (Smith 231). They speak “a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English” (Smith 231). The Raggastani label represents a kind of dissident hybrid identity:

Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck *geezer* who would fight in their corner if necessary; added to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani. (Smith 231-2, emphasis in original)

All members of the Raggastani have at one time or another been “fucked with” for trying either to conform to the dominant white culture or to maintain their diasporic culture, and in response they form their own hybrid culture (Smith 232). At school, Millat’s charisma and sex appeal allow him to fit into all social circles, regardless of ethnicity:

To the cockney wide-boys in the white jeans and the coloured shirts, he was the joker, the risk taker, respected lady-killer. To the black kids he was fellow weed-smoker and valued customer. To the Asian kids, hero and spokesman. Social chameleon. And underneath it all, there remained an ever present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere. (Smith 269)

The downside of Millat’s hybridity represents what Thompson refers to as an “excess of belonging” (Thompson 123). Thompson claims that “the text suggests that, as a result of belonging to different generations and holding a diversity of cultural beliefs, the possibility of feeling at ‘home’ in this multicultural world is unlikely” (Thompson 123). This feeling of “transience, indeterminacy and ‘homelessness’” (Thompson 124) finds its strongest

expression in the previous description, but can also be applied to Millat's father: Samad cannot accept the Western components of his identity because they conflict with his essentialist view of his ethnicity, but he cannot return to that fundamental identity because he has been corrupted by the West. Like his son, Samad suffers from an "excess of belonging."

Thus, like that of his father, Millat's identity is marred by essentialism. His transformation into a "hybrid homeboy" comes close to opening a space for malleable self-determination, but his dependence on stereotypes and his desire for a personal, unchanging essence dooms Millat to instability and eventual failure. He suffers from what Dawson calls "a nagging contradiction within this act of bricolage: the extremely cosmopolitan pastiche of cultural influences that constitute 'raggastani' identity are used to legitimate an increasingly essentialist and exclusionary model of ethnic identity" (Dawson 165). Despite its mixed origins, Millat's raggastani identity eventually leads him to Muslim fundamentalism and a violent reaction to those forces in Western society (such as literature and science) that Millat and his fellow members of KEVIN see as incompatible with their "eternal" dogma.

As time passes, Millat's feelings of isolation and impotence in the face of dominant British culture draw him closer and closer to fundamentalist Islam, in the form of KEVIN. "In fact, the problem with Millat's subconscious [...] was that it was basically split" (Smith 444). Millat comes to construct himself more and more from the contents of the various essentialist pamphlets produced by KEVIN, lessons and concepts that are difficult to understand or conform to under the best of circumstances, and that conflict more and more with those aspects of Western culture to which Millat is so drawn. He simultaneously wants to be a fundamentalist Muslim and a Western capitalist gangster (Smith 446).

Driven by the incompatibility of the two positions he wants simultaneously to inhabit and by the feeling of impotence and failure in the face of what he perceives as a dominant,

homogeneous British culture of which he can have no part, Millat turns to violence. In his desperation not to end up as his father, the “faulty, broken, stupid, one handed waiter of a man who had spent eighteen years in a strange land and made no more mark than [his name scrawled on a park bench]” (Smith 506) or his great-great-grandfather Mangal Pande who “hung from a tree while Havelock the executioner sat on a chaise longue in Delhi” (Smith 506), Millat decides to assert his own identity and agency through violence against the symbol of his essentialized Western enemy, Marcus Chalfen and his FutureMouse: “If Marcus Chalfen was going to write his name all over the world, Millat was going to write it BIGGER. There would be no misspelling of *his* name in the history books” (Smith 506, emphasis in original). Fortunately, his ambitions for self-assertion through violence are foiled when Archie Jones steps into the path of the bullet meant for Chalfen’s mentor, Dr. Perret (Smith 553).

Irie’s relationship to both elements of her cultural inheritance (those of the dominant white culture and of her grandmother’s Jamaican culture) is significantly different from that of Millat to his. Where Millat wishes to conform to a largely fictional stereotype (the Hollywood gangster), Irie is willing to adapt in response to the pressures of cultural expectations: she chooses to embrace the possibility of becoming a dentist. Where Millat desires to conform to an eternal and unchangingly rigid dogma inherited from his homeland, Irie celebrates the space for self-actualization and agency provided by the “perfect blankness of the past.” Irie enjoys significant freedom with regards to her relationship to both white British and Afro-Caribbean culture. As Pirjo Ahokas suggests, she “begins to question constructed binary oppositions when piecing together details of her ancestry” (Ahokas 117) and this questioning ultimately frees her from the constraints of those essentialist binaries.

The space of perfect blankness, the realization that Irie need not subscribe to an unchanging and unchangeable personal essence or cultural norm, is given physical shape in her child, who is described as “a perfectly plotted thing with no real coordinates. A map to an imaginary fatherland” (Smith 516). In the brief glimpse of life for Irie at the turn of the third millennium, Smith shows us “Irie’s fatherless little girl” who feels “free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings” (Smith 541). Irie’s daughter is intimately connected to both “*Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid*” (Smith 541, emphasis in original) but need not be essentially tied to either. She is free of the cultural restraints of inheritance; the expectation that she must be one specific thing, have one rigid identity, does not apply to this child because she is literally free of knowing who her father is. She can construct her own identity, borrowing traits from both, without being bound to either, just as her mother can construct her identity borrowing elements from white and black culture without being bound to either. She can choose to take on differing roles dependent on the circumstances at hand, adapting to external expectations rather than either conforming to them or trying fruitlessly to resist them. This is what Ahokas means by Irie’s “ongoing construction of a mobile and multiple identity” (Ahokas 126).

Of special significance in the previous quotation is the word “ongoing”. Essentialist perspectives, such as that of Samad, assume that identity is something static and unchanging, something that is achieved and thereafter remains proof against intrusion, either within the individual or across generations of individuals: “And don’t speak to me of second generation! One generation! Indivisible! Eternal!” (Smith 289) As previously demonstrated, this vision of identity is untenable: Samad’s own identity proves unstable when it comes into contact with other notions of self, particularly elements of dominant white British culture. His project to protect Magid from such intrusion completely backfires. It does not inculcate an indivisible

and eternal Bangladeshi Muslim identity in his favoured son, but rather reinforces Magid's desire to assimilate completely to that same dominant white British culture. Millat too is hampered by an essentialist view of identity, in his failed attempt to reconcile principles of rigid, fundamentalist Islam with equally rigid and improbable elements of Western "gangster" culture. Only Irie is capable of grasping the necessarily adaptive nature of identity. As Dominic Head observes, "This cultural space of migrant and post-migrant identity is, necessarily, transitional, an interactive site in which multiculturalism must be redeemed as an active, conflictual process" (Head 108). Irie must take constant advantage of the space she has forged for herself within the cultural landscape of multicultural London. Thompson expresses this process and its representation in the novel well:

By complicating notions of truth and history the novel highlights the tenuous and insubstantive nature of the quest for 'roots' or 'home' in a plural society where nothing seems to be dependable or definable, and where fiction and 'truth' have become indistinguishable. This lack of surety would appear to be a necessary element if Stuart Hall's claim is applicable. He contends we should perceive our ethnic identities as being connected with the notion of movement, multiple origins and hybridity and advocates the replacement of "roots" with "routes". (Thompson 133)

This is not an easy process. The novel demonstrates that "inhabiting a multicultural society is not easy for *anyone*, and that we are all implicated by an 'excess of belonging' due to the fact that [...] our history, corporeality and nationality are constantly in flux" (Thompson 133, emphasis in original).

How are we to read the novel's conclusions (if it has any) on the subject of identity in postcolonial England, if it is indeed the case that Irie is able to find a space in which she can continually try on different cultural roles? Thompson believes that "the multicultural world of the novel [...] exists within an 'anxious setting'. By interrogating the effects of assimilation and syncretism, rather than depicting a utopian, integrated society, *White Teeth* offers a *critique*

of multiculturalism” (Thompson 137, emphasis in original). Ahokas, on the other hand, claims that:

the humorous novel is unabashedly utopian, as it does not undercut the final dream vision [...] It is true that Irie’s postmodern urban female identity never coheres into a finished or completed form, but as a metaphor for new hybridity, the small imagined community suggests that in addition to the Caribbean elements, it will fuse cross-cultural elements of the Asian diasporic experience as well as the best part of Chalfenism, as embodied by the family’s accompanying rebellious animal activist son. (Ahokas 127)

Reading Irie’s hybrid identity formation as a success, however, leads me to interpret the novel more in accordance with the view of Dominic Head, who writes:

This novel, part celebration, part cautionary tale, is an apt summation of the triumphs and the limits of British multiculturalism at the end of the century. But it also embodies a potential solution to several of the difficulties that have beset earlier migrant writers in the post-war years. Where Rushdie and others have worried about integration and assimilation, Smith presents integration as a productive, two-way street. (Head 111)

Through the Iqbals, Smith demonstrates the dangers and difficulties of identity formation in postcolonial Britain faced by immigrants of all generations. Through Irie, she exemplifies possibilities for self-determination, although this process is no less difficult. Whether or not Smith anticipates what Head refers to as “a time of such pervasive integration in which roots no longer matter” (Head 114), and whether or not such a social reality is desirable for Smith or critics who think and write about postcolonial identity, it is clear that Smith’s novel has a message that reaches beyond constructed ethnic boundaries and is of value to immigrants and “natives” alike.

There is, however, a problematic element to Smith’s narrative and to any reading of it as a positive vision of the potential for the realization of an identity that is simultaneously black and British. Like Karim, the protagonist of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Irie is biracial: her father is white, her mother black. This dual racial identity, taken in conjunction with her

status as a third-generation immigrant, implies a limitation on who can successfully establish a space for self-definition, especially when we compare Irie's experiences with those of the Iqbals. Both of Magid and Millat's parents are South Asian; Samad is fully Bengali and a first generation immigrant. Their ill-fated investments in essentialized identities may not be explicitly linked with their ethnic backgrounds, but when compared with Irie, a pattern does seem to emerge: it is only the person of mixed race who can successfully mix cultures, while those of a single race are doomed to essentialism. This, combined with the overt theme of genetic inheritance, experimentation and manipulation found throughout the novel (and best exemplified by Marcus's FutureMouse), comes dangerously close to reinforcing a physiological or genetic interpretation of culture.

A specific example of this problem can be found when Irie attempts to straighten her hair. Jackie, one of the hairdressers at P.K.'s Afro Hair, first identifies Irie as "half-caste" (Smith 273) and later another hairdresser exclaims over Irie's hair: "That's half-caste hair for you. I wish mine were like that. That'll relax beautiful" (Smith 277). If the aforementioned metaphorical reading is applied to this passage, it seems to imply that, as a "half-caste," Irie has certain innate advantages over other women of colour, who might also want to expunge their ethnic traits in an attempt to reconstruct themselves according to white British norms. This reading runs the risk of falling into the same problem of essentialism that mars the Iqbals' attempts at identity formation. There may be grounds for argument that because Irie already stands physiologically in an in-between space, thanks to her ethnic identification as "half-caste," she has some kind of innate advantage in attempting to participate in both black and British cultural modes. But such a reading runs the risk of becoming an argument for biological determinism and racism. Dawson attempts to paper over this rather disturbing implication by claiming that Smith is using Irie's biracial status to parody biological

determinism: “All too often, [theories of hybridity] simply [invert] the dominant tropes of colonial discourse by representing diasporic populations as inherently progressive [...] *White Teeth* self-consciously parodies the biological determinism of much hybridity discourse” (Dawson 160). However, this does not account for the potential reinforcement of biological determinism by having the only character in the novel to escape the fetters of essentialized national identity be herself biracial, while her ethnically Bengali contemporaries remain trapped in stereotypes.

Both *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* run the risk of reinforcing biological determinism (while simultaneously celebrating release from binding racist expectations) by presenting only biracial characters as capable of successfully occupying both black and British positions. In addition, they both seem to deny such agency for first-generation immigrants, for only those born in Britain seem able to be both black and British. In order to find a portrayal of a successful first-generation, non-biracial immigrant we must look to the third and final novel explored in this project, Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*.

4. Skating in a Sari: Identity, Home, and the Successful Subaltern in Monica

Ali's *Brick Lane*

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* differs significantly from *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* in that its protagonist is not a second- or third-generation biracial immigrant to London, but a first-generation Bangladeshi immigrant who manages to establish a space for self-determination in spite of poor socio-economic circumstances. *Brick Lane* describes the means by which the first generation immigrant can also find a place in British society without resorting to either assimilation or diaspora, but rather by escaping a fixed, externally imposed identity in favour of one in which different roles can be tried out, transformed, and if necessary discarded. *Brick Lane* also presents this space for self-determination (in the form of Nazneen's London apartment) more literally than do either *The Buddha of Suburbia* or *White Teeth*.

Brick Lane reverses colonial expectations. It is the story of Nazneen, a marginalized woman of South Asian origins, who succeeds in establishing a place for herself in London while her colonized, educated husband, Chanu, fails and is eventually forced to return to Bangladesh. The novel demonstrates the failure of the colonial project to transform the colonized into "civilized" imperial citizens, but more than that it examines the potential of the marginalized immigrant to succeed precisely because she is marginalized and therefore has no preconceptions about either British-ness or her place in British society. This gendered reversal of customary expectations is demonstrated in Nazneen's evolving vision of London and of the means of finding a place within it, which is juxtaposed against her husband's colonized literary vision and his failure to establish such a space. *Brick Lane* is not the first novel to present this reversal: *The Buddha of Suburbia* presents a strikingly similar example of a marginalized South Asian female immigrant realizing her potential while her educated husband fails. But Kureishi's portrayal of this reversal is not nearly as complete as that found

in *Brick Lane* because Jeeta and her husband Anwar, who correspond to Nazneen and Chanu, are secondary characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Though not as well developed, the story of Jeeta's success clearly elucidates the inverse relationship between the rise of the marginalized immigrant and the fall of the colonized immigrant.

The polarized view of immigrant potential is best illustrated in *Brick Lane* by Chanu when he bemoans his frustrated ambitions, a complaint he repeats several times throughout the text:

When I came I was a young man. I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the aeroplane I had my degree certificate in my suitcase and a few pounds in my pocket. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me... That was my plan. And then I found things were a bit different. These people here didn't know the difference between me, who stepped off an aeroplane with a degree certificate, and the peasants who jumped off the boat, possessing only the lice on their heads. (Ali 21)

In trying to justify his expectations for success in Britain, Chanu posits a distinction between educated immigrants (with status in their homelands among a colonized, urban, or semi-urban elite), who should logically be expected to find success in Britain, and the unwashed, uneducated peasant – the marginalized member of the colonial society who might not be expected to succeed. Both kinds of immigrant seek something beyond mere economic success; the goal of the immigrant, at least as figured in *Brick Lane*, is socio-cultural (although it is intrinsically bound up with economic success). It is neither complete diaspora nor complete assimilation, but what Nazneen imagines and admires in her lover Karim, “what he had that she and Hasina and Chanu sought but could not find. The thing he had and inhabited so easily. A place in the world” (Ali 216).

This place in the world is the sense of understanding, belonging and familiarity that we feel when we are at home. *Brick Lane* puts significantly more emphasis on place (as opposed to identity) as the source of black success in Britain than either *The Buddha of Suburbia*

or *White Teeth*. That place of success, that space of self-definition, is called “home” throughout the novel. Home, according to David Morley and Angelika Bammer, is a fictional construct: an “enacted space in which we try on roles and relationships of...belonging and foreignness” (Morley 16). Home is a “safe” space in which we can constantly determine and re-determine our relationship to the world around us, both inclusively and exclusively. This concept of home is also bound up with that of “nation;” while these two terms are not interchangeable one cannot be discussed without the other. They are both fictional constructs, stories, and actions that mark out the “we” who tell and participate in them and establish the right to a place for that newly-constructed, ever-changing identity (Morley 16).

Home provides a safe environment for the process of self-definition because it is a claimed space, both literally and socially; that is, home includes some measure of privacy as a shield against unwanted intrusion or the delineation from outside of the members of that home.⁵ This is, of course, a modern Western privilege, reserved in the United Kingdom for the bourgeoisie alone until the nineteenth century (Morley 23). It is this privacy, acknowledged by Nazneen (145) and decidedly absent from her early life in Gouripur, that must be in place in order for her to construct her own identity and find her place in London, beyond the judging eyes of Londoners who can “know everything about her” with “a half-glance” (Ali 239). The privacy on which home is dependent does not mean that it is a place of isolation, as such a space cannot be established without an understanding of the world or

⁵ The privacy of the home does not render it a place of individual isolation. Morley applies anthropologist Mary Douglas’s work to Bammer’s theory. Douglas emphasizes the home’s dependence on solidarity between its members for a perceived common good; the concept of home is dependent on the concept of family, a kind of microcosmic national community maintained by “highly complex forms of co-ordination” and communication (Morley 18). The sense of home is at once one of the safety of privacy and the inherent need for intimacy with fellow family members by which identity is constantly in the process of formation.

society in which it is established: the subject of self-determination needs to understand what he or she is being constantly reestablished in relation to. Without a means of coming to grips with the surrounding socio-cultural environment, the home cannot be established.

Nazneen's success at establishing a home in London cannot be understood without first discussing her husband's failure to do so. Chanu's failure to establish a space of self-identification is bound up with his status as a colonized and educated South Asian and his heavy investment in his "first love," English literature (Ali 70, 210). English literature served a very special function in the Nineteenth Century, at the height of the British Empire, having been charged with the task of "giving the natives an appreciation of the greatness of England and engaging them as grateful participants in a historic civilizing enterprise" (Culler 34-35). The purpose was to transform colonial subjects into British citizens, and ideally such citizens should have been capable of integrating into any society under British rule, including that of London, as the colonial project of English literature was distributed universally throughout the empire.

The colonial project has succeeded for Chanu, but only in part: his primary means of engaging with the world around him is through literature, but it is the literature of a different time and place. Ali graphically demonstrates just how strongly channeled Chanu's perspective is by an obsolete colonial literary project during his and Nazneen's first outing in London after her arrival. As they walk down Bethnal Green Road, Nazneen asks her husband if he likes a sari she would like him to purchase for her. Chanu reacts by referring not to his own aesthetic preferences, or by comparing it to the clothes worn by the English women surrounding him (such as those in "clinging trousers" or with "matching jackets... their shoulders... padded up and out") but instead by referring to Hume's division of human reason (Ali 28-29), a highly theoretical and largely irrelevant response to her practical

inquiry. It is precisely this kind of automatic leap to the intellectual, ideal or literary, rather than to the personal and pragmatic, that will ultimately be Chanu's undoing.⁶

The power that literature has over Chanu is physically palpable. His books, the physical representation of his literary preconceptions, constantly threaten to take over his and Nazneen's private space: they get underfoot (Ali 52); they grow like weeds (Ali 65); are strewn liberally over windowsills, tables and the floor (Ali 110); and they become his refuge and fill his time after he resigns from work (Ali 105), as he spends his days "pinned to the floor beneath his books" (Ali 147). Even his social interactions depend on literature. Chanu's only social acquaintance, Dr Azad, is well aware of the degree to which literature shapes their relationship and the dangers inherent therein, as he tells Nazneen during her visit to his office: "I have signed his petition. I have been lent books. And I have engaged in literary debate. All these are fine things, but everything in its proper place" (Ali 49).

Chanu is dominated by the "classics" as established by imperial Victorian culture: Chaucer, Dickens, Hardy; the Brontës, Thackeray, Austen and, of course, Shakespeare (Ali 24, 25, 57, 70). He seeks to gain an understanding of the world around him through English literature even after he has personal contact with contemporary England, turning to literature rather than current experience to make sense of his environment. As he tells his wife: "You can learn a lot from novels as well. All sorts of things you can pick up, about society, politics, land reform, social division" (Ali 57). But the England as described by these authors and the colonial project that made use of them no longer exists, although it arguably has a significant impact on the contemporary England with which Chanu must contend. It is

⁶ Pirjo Ahokas refers to Chanu's westernization as "superficial" (Ahokas 169) but this seems to imply that his participation in the paradigm of English literature is little more than a façade obscuring another more substantial set of values or identity. My own reading is that Chanu is a kind of "Occidentalism," unable to find resolution between the essentialized ideal he has constructed of the West and the harsh realities he is forced to encounter.

precisely this incongruity between what Chanu expected to find and what was actually there when he arrived in London that inevitably leads to his failure at integration and self-determination.

Chanu already had a clear vision of London, shaped by his colonial-literary preconceptions, before his actual arrival there in the 1960's: "I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the civil service and become Private Secretary to the Prime Minister" (Ali 21). His preconceived success and status are based unrealistically on his knowledge of English literature, as he expects it will lead to his prosperity and elevation as a bureaucrat: "I don't have anything to fear from Wilkie [his co-worker]. I have a degree from Dhaka University in English Literature" (Ali 24). By dismissing the idea that his rival might get the promotion because he "goes to the *pub* with the boss" (Ali 23, emphasis in original) Chanu sets his literary conception of culture against the reality of contemporary London, the culture of "television, pub, throwing darts, kicking a ball...the white working-class culture" (Ali 207). Unfortunately, Chanu's understanding of Britain is outdated, static, and cannot stand up to the pressures of the actual world surrounding him. When he fails to get his promotion it is specifically because he cannot participate in contemporary cultural norms that clash with his idealized literary vision. As a result, his perception of Britain is shattered and he decides to return to Bangladesh.

The mental Bangladesh that Chanu begins to build in preparation for his return is not drawn from his own memories and experiences prior to his arrival in London; instead, he builds a Bangladesh out of the very materials from which he built his failed vision of London: literature. Chanu teaches his daughters the poetry of Tagore (Ali 142) and the history of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Bangladesh, and of the period of colonization, rather than that of Bangladesh's independence or of periods prior to contact

with the West. He speaks only of a Bangladesh as described by Westerners such as Warren Hastings, first Governor-General of India (Ali 149). For Chanu, Bangladesh is a great and happy country not because he can refer back to happy times he himself spent there but because “Research led by professors at the London School of Economics into the links between personal spending power and perceived quality of life has found out that Bangladeshis are the happiest people in the world” (Ali 290). He refers not to personal experience, nor even the observations of fellow Bangladeshis, but once again places authority in the hands of the British. Chanu’s own experiences are conspicuously absent, especially in comparison with his wife’s intimate and highly personalized reflections on Bangladesh that appear throughout the novel. These memories derive from her own experiences of Gouripur rather than being mediated through Western historical accounts, and she is able to draw on her continued correspondence with her sister Hasina to counter Chanu’s unrealistic constructions:

“It may be written down,” said Nazneen. “But I do not believe it.”

“Why?” It was scarcely possible for one face to contain such a quantity of astonishment.

Nazneen did not know how to answer. She was unsure why she had spoken. She did not know if she believed the newspaper report or not. Finally, she said, “My sister – she is not happy.” (Ali 291)

Even after his arrival back in Bangladesh, the world around Chanu is still mediated by his unstable and inflexible colonized perspective. He hints, again mediated through his colonized literary perspective, that he has not found what he had preconceived as home: when Nazneen asks if he has found what he expected, Chanu replies “The English have a saying. You can’t step into the same river twice” (Ali 411). Even in the face of a second shattered literary vision, Chanu returns to the safety of his English literary paradigm, a set of preconceptions from which it seems he cannot escape.

Chanu's preconceptions of England, the product of his social status in Bangladesh, are what prevent him from establishing a home in London. In direct contrast, Nazneen's social position before she arrives in London allows her to succeed where her husband does not. Early in the novel, while eavesdropping on one of Chanu's telephone conversations, Nazneen hears him refer to her as "a girl from the village: totally unspoilt" (Ali 11). It is precisely this, her previous role as a marginalized member of Bangladeshi village society, where she remains largely uneducated and statusless (and thus is unable to develop a colonized preconception of "British-ness"), that allows her to form her own understanding of London and forge her own place within it.

The novel's opening chapter is set in Nazneen's Bangladeshi birthplace, Gouripur, which is conspicuously untouched by Western influence.⁷ When she is born, premature and sickly, Nazneen is not sent to the Westernized hospital in the city, where the doctors and nurses will "put wires on her and give medicines," but is instead left to her Fate (Ali 3), a concept that Ali ties closely to Nazneen's sense of fixed identity as enforced by her life in Gouripur, against which she must struggle in order to find her place in London. She does not come to London because she desires to, or out of any kind of idealized vision of a better life in the former imperial capital, but because her father has arranged what he perceives as an

⁷ Jane Hiddleston calls Ali's representation of Gouripur "stereotypical and contrived" (Hiddleston 61). To imply that Ali might have unconsciously internalized and reproduced Orientalist stereotypes (Hiddleston 61-62) seems to me to be a gross underestimation of Ali's narrative abilities. The stereotypical style of description in the first chapter of the novel serves to emphasize to the careful reader that this is a story that Nazneen has internalized, a story that serves to reinforce her limited and static status as a woman in rural Gouripur, one that she uses to quell difficult questions regarding self-actualization among her daughters (Ali 175-6) and which she ultimately deconstructs in the light of her own experiences when she has achieved an expanded self-actualization. Ali signposts this for the reader by Nazneen's mother's mistaking labour for indigestion (Ali 1) upon which Nazneen later reflects: "And something else Amma was wrong about. Childbirth is like indigestion! Yes, if a snake bites like an ant" (107).

advantageous marriage for her. Until she comes to London Nazneen has no conception of anyone immigrating there out of self-motivated desire. After Chanu's ambitions for promotion begin to fail, her friend Razia tells Nazneen to ask her husband whether or not it is better in England than in Bangladesh, if it is not why he doesn't go back, and if it is why he should complain about discrimination. Her response is to think that "These were questions she had neither asked nor thought of asking. She was in this country because that was what had happened to her. Anyone else, therefore, was here for the same reason" (Ali 53).

Nazneen's place in Gouripur is extremely limiting.⁸ She may be of relatively high status within the village thanks to her father being Gouripur's second-richest man, but her gender forces her into a position of extreme marginality. As her mother tells her in response to her father's activities outside the home, "If God wanted us to ask questions, he would have made us men" (Ali 60). This extremely limited existence drives Hasina to choose the dangerous path of a "love marriage" (which arguably leads her to greater hardship) and Nazneen's mother to suicide, a course that is anathema to the Gouripur Muslim point-of-view (Ali 319). Yasmin Hussain has called the Bangladesh of Nazneen's memories a place of "warmth and security" (Hussain 100) but, even before Nazneen begins to understand her own potential and the limiting effect her previous life has had on her own human agency and self-definition, Gouripur has already been transformed in her perception into a place of inconveniences (Ali 58). Any security that the village provides is that of limitation, stagnation

⁸ Ali is not necessarily reinforcing preconceived stereotypes of Islam as universally oppressive. Hiddleston has already raised this concern with regards to Ali's portrayal of Hasina as vulnerable and naïve (Hiddleston 62), citing critical work by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Sangeeta Ray on the dangers of Western feminism as applied to postcolonial theory (Hiddleston 72). What is important to note is Ali's emphasis on Nazneen's personal experiences and those experiences she reads about in her sister's letters. The novel is an intimate and personal narrative, not one of sweeping brushstrokes across nations as diverse as "India, Pakistan, Egypt, etc." (Hiddleston 72) and should not be mistaken for such.

and the repression of self-actualization and agency: “In Gouripur, a sweatmaker was a sweatmaker, a shoemaker was a shoemaker, and a carpenter was a carpenter. They did not want to be teachers or librarians. They were not waiting for promotions. They did not make themselves unhappy” (Ali 74).

This marginality is what protects Nazneen from the failure to find her space within London that her husband is doomed to suffer. Because she has no expectations of grand success, no conscious and impossible ambitions built out of an outdated image of a London that might never have existed in the first place (and certainly isn’t to be found by the newly-arrived immigrant), Nazneen is able to take much smaller initial steps towards realizing her own potential and finding her home in London. While Chanu dreams of being whisked up into power and predominance merely by virtue of his knowledge of English literature, Nazneen builds on simple, achievable accomplishments. Upon her return from her first outing alone in London, she reflects:

Anything is possible. She wanted to shout it. Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub. To use the toilet. Did you think I could do that? I walked mile upon mile, probably around the whole of London, although I did not see the edge of it. And to get home I went to a restaurant. I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do! (Ali 45, emphasis in original)

This recollection and realization of potential is directed as much at Nazneen herself as it is at her husband. It is her first true realization of her potential in London, a potential that she is finally able to fulfill, unlike the unrealistic and unattainable dreams of her husband. It also serves to reinforce her initial ignorance of the world around her, since her vision of London’s size is completely inaccurate.

Nazneen does display a kind of literary colonialism, but of a very different kind from that of her husband. The one book she investigates in the early chapters of the novel is the Qur’an. Her reading of the Qur’an is significantly coloured by her status as a Gouripur

Bangladeshi, rather than vice versa, as she reads the book in Bengali translation and is unable to read it in the original Arabic (Ali 7-8). This stands in direct contrast to her husband, who reads everything through a colonized lens. Eventually, Nazneen does begin to see the value of learning, but this is after she has already begun to explore the possibility of her place in London:

A sudden regret came to her. How much time she had wasted over the years, eating up her mind with a thousand petty worries and details that added up to nothing. She picked up one of Chanu's books and turned it over, pressed her thumbs on the cover, as if she could squeeze the knowledge from it. (Ali 262)

What is important here, however, is that Nazneen's desire to expand her perspective and knowledge through literature comes after her introduction to a personally experienced London, and although this passage seems to denigrate that personal experience (the "thousand petty worries and details") this literary education could act as a kind of supplement to coming to terms with directly-accessed London, not as an impediment to it, as it would be if she had come to it before coming to London itself, as is the case with her husband.

Unlike her husband, whose vision of London is based on the colonized literary perspective he developed long before his arrival in the United Kingdom, Nazneen develops her perspective on London entirely within the narrative of the novel. She comes to apprehend the city and her potential for creating a home within it through two interrelated symbols, both of which are intimately connected to clothing and appearance: the tattoo lady and the ice-skater.

The tattoo lady appears early in the novel, and represents Nazneen's first brush with the world around her after her immigration to England. Her view of the tattoo lady is not mediated by any kind of preconception of the West but by Nazneen's own personal experiences of Gouripur. She compares the tattooed woman to a South Asian ascetic: "Every

time Nazneen saw her she wore the same look of boredom and detachment. Such a state was sought by the sadhus who walked in rags through the Muslim villages, indifferent to the kindness of strangers, the unkind sun” (Ali 7). The tattoo lady defies this village perspective, and in doing so begins to broaden Nazneen’s horizons: “This woman was poor and fat. To Nazneen it was unfathomable. In Bangladesh it was no more possible to be both poor and fat than to be rich and starving” (Ali 37).

The tattoo lady is a seeming contradiction beyond the unfamiliar conception of poverty she represents. Her status as a “Hell’s Angel” upsets Nazneen, and her most defining feature, her tattoos, are ugly in Nazneen’s eyes (Ali 7). Despite her grotesque appearance, Nazneen is drawn to her precisely because of what makes her so grotesque (Ali 7). Since she never has any contact with the tattoo lady beyond seeing her across the compound, Nazneen must be drawn in some way to her physical appearance, the most heavily emphasized aspect of which is her tattoos, permanent clothing that freezes the appearance of the bearer indefinitely. Nazneen’s interest in and attraction to the tattooed woman coincides with her desire to embed herself into a fixed, limited routine; Nazneen still sees herself as an object rather than a subject, and desires nothing more than to become as static in her assigned role as the tattoos on her neighbour’s flesh.

Nazneen quickly abandons her ambition to fit the static mold into which Gouripur and Chanu expect her to fit, and the tattoo lady is forgotten (and eventually dies without Nazneen ever meeting her). She first attempts to reconstruct her identity by following the Gouripur traditions in her apartment in a seemingly contradictory manner: for example, she refuses to eat in front of Chanu, despite his protests, mirroring the conservative Bangladeshi tradition that women should eat only after the men of the household have eaten. This seemingly contradictory action is actually a form of protest: as Pirjo Ahokas suggests,

resignation to custom motivated by defiance is a step towards self-actualization (Ahokas 170). This attempt at self-assertion is unsuccessful, and Nazneen turns once again to the world outside her apartment to find the tools to establish her place in the world.

The ice-skater represents a more flexible symbol for Nazneen's understanding of her own potential, a symbol that undergoes substantial transformation throughout the novel. The fantasy of the ice-skater has been criticized as being "seemingly ridiculous" (Hiddleston 61), but on close reading it is a complex and well-chosen symbolic metaphor for Nazneen's growing understanding and self-definition. The ice-skater is decidedly feminine, is an image she would never have come across or even been able to conceive of in her previous life in Gouripur, and is intimately linked with clothing, the source of Nazneen's eventual independence and self-definition.

Nazneen first comes into contact with the image of the ice-skater early in the novel, through the medium of television (television is set up in opposition to the literature that mediates Chanu's perspective):

...the screen held her. A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display) and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena ... every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration ... [the woman] stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the law of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. (Ali 22-23)

It is important to take particular notice of what Nazneen sees in this vision: an empowered woman, capable of breaking out of all boundaries imposed upon her, and in direct, erotic relation to an attractive young man. But the ice-skater is an idealized image, displayed via the primary entertainment medium of the English working class, and she is still defined by her relationship to a man.

Nazneen places special emphasis on the clothing of the ice-skater. Clothing is what sets Nazneen and her fantasy image apart, although she does not fully realize this until much later in the novel, after she begins her affair with Karim: “Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life could change as well” (Ali 228). Clothing in Nazneen’s vision of London, and of her place within it, serves a two-fold purpose: it is a means of self-assertion while at the same time serving as a limitation to social agency. She recalls the story of Arzoo, the man in her village who attempted to assert his own identity by wearing an outlandish jacket for someone of his socio-economic standing. In Gouripur, as in London, “You think that a clothing is just a clothing. But as a matter of fact it is not. In a place like this it is a serious thing” (Ali 314). In Gouripur it is a symbol of marginalization, of social position without the opportunity for change: a person is marked out and locked into his or her position in the village by his or her clothing, without hope of ever escaping outside definition. Clothing has the same effect in London, but thanks to the increased privacy and the greater diversity of social norms there is room to maneuver. Nazneen is witness to a multiplicity of modes of self-expression through clothing: most of her fellow Bangladeshi women retain their traditional saris, but Razia and Mrs. Azad are able to adopt Western clothing to differing degrees (in particular, the clothing of the working class with whom they have the most contact). Nazneen is also exposed to the middle- and upper-class clothing of female professionals in her walks through London, and of course she is witness to the costumes of the ice-skater, fantastic and idealized clothing to match her fantastic and idealized freedom.

The ice-skater is a tangible symbol of all that Nazneen could hope to accomplish: her space in society and the freedom of self-definition. The ice-skater is, of course, an idealized impossibility, but unlike Chanu’s immobilizing literary vision it is adapted over time as

Nazneen understands more and more about her surroundings and herself. At first she rejects the ice-skater, seeing her as an impediment to her assigned role as limited Bangladeshi wife: “She was glad when the ice e-skating came no more. She began to pray five times each day” (Ali 27). The image, however, cannot be denied for long, as Nazneen begins to outgrow her marginalized position.

Her second major encounter with the ice-skater is in a magazine, another medium with decidedly lower-class intellectual associations than the literature of her husband:

She was looking at a magazine, an English magazine that Chanu had left. There was a picture of a couple: ice skaters. She stood on one leg. Her body was horizontal and the other leg perpendicular. Her arms reached out and held on to his hand, but she looked up and smiled directly at Nazneen. Her body was spangled, silver and blue. Her legs were as long as the Padma. She was a fairy-tale creature, a Hindu goddess. Nazneen fell, somehow, into that picture and caught hold of the man’s hand. She was shocked to find she was traveling across the ice, on one foot, at terrible speed. And the man smiled and said, “Hold on tight.” Little green gems twinkled in his black suit. Nazneen squeezed his hand. She felt the rush of wind on her cheeks, and the muscles in her thighs flexing. The ice smelled of limes. The cold air made her flush with warmth from deep down...And the man let go of her hand but she was not afraid. She lowered her leg and she skated on. Until Raqib woke and looked at her skeptically. “Yes,” she told him, “your mother is a foolish woman.” But she went to the mirror and stared hard at her serious face, the wide cheeks and big forehead and stubby-lashed, close-set eyes, and wondered for a while about what she saw. (Ali 71)

Nazneen has internalized the image of the ice-skater. She is prompted by a still image into a fantasy of her own inclusion in the events, furnishing her own erotic details: the ice, smelling of limes, foreshadows the smell she so pleasantly associates with her future lover Karim.

While the image is still one of dependence by the marginalized, feminine woman on the strong, masculine male (who in the image literally supports the woman in her movement at terrible speed), Nazneen makes the first move towards a concept of female independence when in her fantasy she lets go of the man’s hand and takes off under her own power. This first expression of independence is further underlined by Nazneen imagining herself as an independent woman when reflecting on her sister’s letters immediately after this fantasy.

After waking from her reverie, Nazneen inspects her own features, describing herself in the same terms that she has overheard from her husband (Ali 11). But this suggests at least the possibility for self-definition, as she wonders not about what others see but about what *she* sees.

This internalized image again comes to Nazneen as she begins to explore her outward appearance and the possible ramifications for her place in London should she choose to change it. After trying on a pair of her husband's trousers in emulation of the London women she has seen (and of her friend Razia, who is growing ever-more accustomed to life in London), Nazneen first explores physically what she has formerly only fantasized about:

Close to the wall, eyes to the mirror, she raised one leg as high as she could. She closed her eyes and skated off. Ridiculous. Her leg wobbled. She opened her eyes and was thrilled by her slim brown legs. Slowly, she drew the left leg up and rested the heel on the inside of her right thigh. She tried to spin and got caught up in the bedspread, then fell on the mattress, giggling. (Ali 112)

Experimenting with what she considers to be Western clothing sends Nazneen into an ice-skating fantasy. This moment of imagination immediately follows her gaining two new measures of self-identification and independence: her work as a seamstress and her introduction to Karim, who will shortly become her lover. This introduction brings Nazneen closer and closer to the ideal of the ice-skater. After putting on one of the sequined vests she has been working on, Nazneen...

...looked in the mirror but she did not see herself, only the flare of the sequins, and then she closed her eyes and the ice smelled of limes and she moved without weight and there was someone at her side, her hand in another, and they turned together, arms around waists, and through her half-closed lashes she saw him. The fine gold chain about his neck. And then she opened her eyes and took off the top. She held it out again and she saw that the sequins were cheap. She turned it over in her hands. The sequins looked like fish scales. (Ali 178)

The possibility of self-definition through clothing is explicitly associated with the image of the ice-skater. Now that Karim has been introduced directly into the fantasy, he helps to shape it, giving definite form and appearance to the male partner that Nazneen had previously

imagined, and the erotic, fantastical outfit of the ice-skater has been augmented by his clothing; in fact, his clothing (and the smell of limes, which predates his first appearance in the novel) are the only things that identify the male ice-skater as Karim. Nazneen is also beginning to realize that the image of the ice-skater, and by extension her vision of Karim, is just that: an idealized image, something she wants to exist in its perfect form but which in reality has no substance or reflection in the world around her, in the same way that Chanu's literary London does not exist. In order to really find her place in London, she must break through this idealized vision of the man who has what she seeks and cannot procure, to the recognition of the reality that Karim does not have a place and cannot find one for himself (nor can she allow him to give her definition and identity); her realization that the sequins are cheap and reminiscent of fish scales is the first sign that she is already coming to this conclusion.

The image of the ice-skater collapses after Nazneen's breakdown. In an attempt to cheer her up, Chanu turns the television on to an ice-skating show, but in her despair over her affair Nazneen realizes that her visions of Karim and the ice-skaters, so intimately bound up together, are false, impossibly-idealized fantasies: "Nazneen looked at the couple on the television screen, the false smiles, the made-up faces, the demented illusion of freedom chasing around their enclosure" (Ali 302). She does not, however, turn away from these images completely, nor does she turn back to her previous world to idealize it in turn (as Chanu does when his vision of London is finally shattered). Instead, she explodes those idealized images and the static position they would have her fit into: Karim is not the idealized, confident man Nazneen made him out to be. He sees only what he wants to see (Ali 351), idealizing Bangladesh and international Muslim culture because he is dissatisfied (perhaps rightly so) with the way he is treated in London and the identity he feels is imposed upon him. But Nazneen is not "the real thing" (Ali 322), the perfect, submissive Muslim

woman that he needs her to be to fulfill his idealized vision of his home and culture, the identity he attempts to impose on her in turn. Nor is Karim what she envisioned: “Karim in his jeans and trainers, sitting at her table ... telling her all the things that lay hidden just outside her window. He always knew. He knew about the world and his place in the world. That was how she liked to remember him” (Ali 377).

Nazneen frees herself from Karim, revealing to him what she has discovered: “From the very beginning to the very end, we didn’t see things. What we did – we made each other up” (Ali 382).⁹ The men in Nazneen’s life serve a very specific function with regard to her achieving her place in the world: they act as stepping-stones. The men who take part in the public sphere within the novel also try to define and solidify the private sphere, and while they can be a part of the process towards self-definition, they must ultimately be abandoned because of this desire to impose identity on their wives or lovers. The Arendtian division of the public and private spheres (the nation and the home) is a decidedly gendered divide that Nazneen’s means of self-identification calls into question. The focus of self-definition through work and politics in the public sphere is decidedly male-centric, as traditionally women are excluded from it (Morley 67-8). The absolute duality between public and private renders the home a static place in which the continuous action of self-definition becomes impossible, denying the woman (who has been relegated to it) mobility.

The novel renders this isolation of the “domestic” into a false construct, used only to empower men in their role in the public sphere and provide them with a stable, familiar

⁹ This drives Karim to leave London for the same reasons that Chanu left: the failure of his idealized vision to stand up to reality. He makes the final transition, the culmination of the way his clothing changes over time, his long journey into a fantasy of self-determination, into a contemporary image of the negative idealist, the jihadist: “Nazneen had a vision: Karim in his jeans and white shirt, a thin gold chain at his neck and a bale of dresses over his shoulder; Karim in a mountain cave, surrounded by men in turbans wielding machine guns” (Ali 409).

space in which to escape the stresses of public life and action. This construct ignores the intrinsic link between the public and the private that provides for the possibility to transform the home into a liminal space wherein the actions of the public sphere can take place, such as work or production. Pirjo Ahokas identifies the networking of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets as the source of Nazneen's questioning and challenging of the private stasis to which patriarchal tradition relegates her (170), and suggests that the networking of private spheres brings elements of the public into Nazneen's previously limited household. Nazneen's neighbour and closest friend Razia serves as the example by which Nazneen brings work (namely sewing) into her private sphere. This inclusion of public in private breaks the mold of stasis and allows for the act of self-definition: through financial self-sufficiency Nazneen and her daughters are able to stay in London by their own volition when Chanu returns to Bangladesh; and Nazneen is able to bring Western clothing into the apartment, despite her husband's desire after his ambitions falter that their private space remain free of Western paraphernalia. It also introduces Karim into what would have been a completely isolated space, beginning Nazneen's erotic awakening, which further extends her ability for self-definition.

In establishing her space of self-definition Nazneen re-appropriates the ice-skater:

In front of her was a huge white circle, bounded by four-foot-high boards. Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice. She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colours that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath. A woman swooped by on one leg. No sequins, no short skirt. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs ... Nazneen turned around. To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there. (Ali 415)

Nazneen has established her place in London. She is like the ice, capable of change and adaptation to the outside world without being completely subsumed into British culture. She is also the ice-skater: independent of definition by a man, free of the artifice of the sequined costume that is nothing more than a glossy illusion. She is wearing what she wants to wear,

what is comfortable, be it the jeans of the native Londoner or the sari of the successful Bangladeshi immigrant.

Nazneen has reached this state of self-definition through the medium of clothing, but not by the typical means of adopting a new style of dress. Instead, it is the process of producing clothing that wins Nazneen her space of self-determination. Her work as a seamstress is her first step to financial and social independence from her husband, is the means by which she meets her lover, and finally, when she and Razia go into business together (without the influence or interference of a middleman), it is in fashion design and production, combining British and Bangladeshi elements to produce something uniquely their own (Ali 404). The clothing Nazneen and Razia create is the product of what Ahokas refers to as cultural hybridity,¹⁰ which serves as “an enabling survival strategy which signifies change and agency” (Ahokas 166). This cultural hybridity (literally hybrid clothing) allows the women to be empowered by adopted cultural practices and norms while retaining valuable aspects of their previous identities; it is adaptation rather than assimilation.

While the clothing they create may constitute an outward manifestation of an internal hybridity, it is important to note that Nazneen herself does not demonstrate cultural hybridity in her outward appearance. Ahokas claims that Razia displays the virtues of black British feminism, using a kind of cultural assimilation as a survival strategy as demonstrated by adopting masculine and Western clothing (Ahokas 172). Creating a space for self-

¹⁰ It is important to note that this cultural hybridity is not necessarily a process that favours either the subject's native culture over the West, or vice versa. Ahokas has rightly applied the lens of Razia Azis's theory of black British feminism to the narrative of *Brick Lane*, stating that instead of depicting difference as oppression and asserting identity as an end in itself, this new feminism of difference celebrates difference as enriching, and urges marginalized women “to incorporate both the deconstruction of subjectivity and the political necessity of asserting identity” (Ahokas 166). This cultural hybridity must, however, be first and foremost an empowering process; otherwise it becomes little more than a slow or incomplete form of cultural assimilation.

definition, however, is far more complex a process than merely mixing forms of clothing: Ahokas applies Judith Butler's theory to the characters in the novel and demonstrates that they are distinctly "determined by surrounding discourses" (Ahokas 173), which is to say that merely changing their clothing cannot necessarily overcome the outside influences of white London's stereotypical expectations; hence Razia is spat upon while wearing her trademark Union Jack sweatshirt (Ali 330). Razia's "visual shift" into the "embodiment ... of the new Western environment she is located within" (Hussain 106) is not enough, because she and Nazneen must still "negotiate their new identities in a racist society" (Ahokas 177). In this way, Nazneen's journey towards self-definition outpaces the relatively limited metaphor of hybridity. The hybrid clothing she creates is only one part of the complex transformation she undergoes, and presumably continues to undergo after the novel's conclusion. It is not merely the establishment of hybrid clothing and knowledge of the Western culture required to produce it that constitutes Nazneen's success as a black woman living in contemporary London; it is the creation of home, a space for continual redefinition that makes use of multiple cultures and points-of-view without having to subscribe fanatically to any one, that renders Nazneen simultaneously black and British.

The narrative elements in *The Buddha of Suburbia* that relate directly to Nazneen's experience in *Brick Lane* (the story of Jeeta's success and her husband's failure and eventual death) do not detail this process of self-determination on the part of Jeeta, but they do emphasize the inverse relationship between the success of the marginalized immigrant and the failure of the colonized immigrant, as well as demonstrating the importance of deconstructing the gendered divide between public and private that leads to the empowerment of the female immigrant. Anwar, Chanu's counterpart in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, shares many traits with Nazneen's husband: he is an educated, colonized urbanite

from a wealthy part of Bombay (Kureishi 23). Once London culture has fully eroded his expectations and seemingly threatens his family honour, Anwar begins to retreat into an idealized Indian Muslim identity, becoming obsessed with his daughter marrying the man he has chosen for her: “It was certainly bizarre, Uncle Anwar behaving like a Muslim. I’d never known him believe in anything before, so it was an amazing novelty to find him literally staking his life on the principle of absolute patriarchal authority” (Kureishi 64). His domestic fantasy fails to be realized just as Chanu’s idealized Bangladesh cannot be found when he returns home,¹¹ and Anwar begins a descent into despair and confusion: “...he’d changed since the advent of Changez, who was such a disappointment that Anwar – who had been counting on being given a life-transfusion by a son – had become an old man, his natural course of decay being accelerated, not delayed, by the fresh element which had turned out to be not-so-fresh” (Kureishi 170).

Jeeta shares similar social circumstances with Nazneen: she is of relatively high status but of decidedly rural and uneducated origins, with little grasp of the English language, even after living in London for more than two decades (Kureishi 26). While her husband is still active she learns next to nothing about the world around her: “I often asked Jeeta who the Foreign Secretary of Great Britain was, or the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but she never knew” (Kureishi 51). She begins to succeed socially and financially once she gains a measure of independence from her failing husband, as is the case in *Brick Lane*. The inverse relationship between Jeeta and Anwar’s success is even more strongly underlined in *The Buddha of Suburbia* than is that between Nazneen and Chanu’s in *Brick Lane*: as Anwar descends into depression at the failure of his idealized vision of his home, Jeeta becomes more

¹¹ Anwar also seeks to return home to South Asia after his expectations are shattered: “‘I want to go home now,’ he said. ‘I’ve had enough of this damn place’” (Kureishi 172).

and more self-actualized: “Princess Jeeta was becoming stronger and more willful as Anwar declined” (Kureishi 208).

Brick Lane demonstrates and celebrates the capacity of marginalized female immigrants to succeed in spite of normative expectations and the failure of the colonial project to “civilize” colonial citizens. Despite the length at which Nazneen’s transformation is described within its pages, *Brick Lane* has been criticized as being unresolved: “the conclusion to the novel fails to provide a solution to [Nazneen and Razia’s] sense of loss and ‘homing’ desires. Nothing is resolved, Ali’s characters are still living in a transitory state” (Hussain 98). What this kind of criticism fails to acknowledge is that the process of establishing a home and an identity is just that: a process. Self-determination is not a static state achieved after a series of hard lessons, but is the process of continually realizing and re-establishing identity without succumbing to the constraints of outside essentializing influences. Monica Ali’s novel is not a utopian vision of immigrant integration, but it is a sincere nod to the potential of previously marginalized immigrants, especially women, to find a space for self-actualization in their adopted societies, as demonstrated by the arguably exaggerated tone of Razia’s final statement, “This is England...You can do whatever you like” (Ali 415). At an early stage of *Brick Lane*, Chanu asks his wife a rhetorical question: “If a man has only ever driven a rickshaw and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him” (Ali 16)? Ali would have us realize and acknowledge, that, contrary to possible preconceptions, one can expect a great deal from both the rickshaw driver and the seemingly marginalized Bangladeshi wife.

5. Conclusion

Having looked at three contemporary British novels that explore the possibility of being simultaneously black and British, what overarching conclusions can one draw? How do these novels as a group reflect such a reinterpretation of Britishness, and what possibilities and problems do they point out together? Outside of similar character biographies and plot components, what do these novels share in terms of a vision of postcolonial British society?

The first and most obvious point is that all three novels present a positive view, that it is possible to be simultaneously black and British in spite of the extent to which each novel's conclusion is problematized. By the end of their respective novels, Karim has achieved socioeconomic success and realized that his identity is fluid, that he can choose which identity he presents in order to best suit his particular circumstances and give him the fullest advantage; Irie has freed herself and her daughter from the constraints of cultural expectation by establishing a space in which she can constantly construct and reconstruct her own identity; and Nazneen has established a home for herself through the empowerment of socioeconomic self-sufficiency in spite of (and perhaps because of) her subaltern status upon arriving in Britain.

All three novels also problematize these conclusions. Karim's realization of his own agency and his optimistic vision of his own future in London is overshadowed by the impending rise of Thatcherite conservatism, a period that would see the resurrection and further entrenchment of racism within the British political system, through policies like the 1981 Immigration Act. Irie's transcendence from racialized expectation is seemingly incomplete and marred by the possibility that her escape, in comparison to the failure to escape of her "pure caste" peers, is related to biracial biological predetermination. Furthermore, the vision of her and her daughter having escaped into a space of self-

determination some time in the new millennium is just that: a vision, not a concrete event in the plot of the novel. *Brick Lane* may conclude with the statement that in Britain you can do whatever you like, as impossible as it may seem, but such a conclusion (and indeed vast portions of the novel dealing with the realities of life as an immigrant textile worker in contemporary London) can be all too easily read as oversimplified, romanticized and naïve.

These novels also seem to impose limitations on who can achieve transcendence from the pressures of a binary identity divide. In the case of *Buddha* and especially *White Teeth*, it is only the biracial characters that are able to establish space in which to try on multiple identities, while their “uniracial” counterparts are limited by adhering to one or the other stereotype. Taken together, this could be interpreted as reinforcing the concept of culture as being biologically determined, a concept these novels are really meant to refute.

Brick Lane, on the other hand, limits agency to the subaltern members of visible-minorities living in Britain: only Nazneen is able to establish a home for herself in London, thanks in large part to her having no preconceived notions of Britishness, arriving in Britain as a blank slate (at least in terms of British culture) and having the opportunity to come to her own conclusions based on personal, subjective experience rather than predetermined expectations derived from outside authorities. Again, limiting who can establish a space for personal agency seems to countermand the final message of the novel: you can be anything you want to be in Britain, but only if you meet certain pre-determined socio-economic requirements (in this case ones that are the opposite of what might be expected). It seems that, according to the novel, only the naïve are able to succeed in becoming simultaneously black and British.

This interpretation of the novel’s conclusion brings to the surface a significant problem to be found in all three novels: the complexity of the interrelation of race with class

and gender. After all, according to Loomba, “‘Race’ as a concept receives its meanings contextually, and in relation to other social groupings and hierarchies, such as gender and class” (Loomba 105). This means that the characters’ experiences, and their authors’ shaping of those experiences, are as heavily influenced by class and gender divides as they are by racism.

In the case of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the novel’s central protagonist shares the same gender and class strata with his author: a male of the lower-middle class in suburban London. Karim is propelled out of this relatively narrow class space by the efforts of his white stepmother Eva, who transplants Karim and Haroon to central London, and who provides Karim with his first theatre job. Karim’s socio-economic advancement, however, is dependent on racist attitudes that permeate all classes in British society: the middle-class racism expressed by Shadwell is as much an impediment to Karim’s sense of belonging as Hairy Back’s working-class brand of prejudice.

Both *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* feature gender as having a significant impact on the success or failure of their characters. In the case of *White Teeth*, Irie’s adaptability must inevitably be read as being connected to her gender, as all three male characters to which she can be compared (the Iqbals) fail where she succeeds. This success, however, is dependent on her conforming to a class-centric interpretation of her position as a black woman living in Britain: she decides to mold herself according to Marcus Chalfen’s judgment that she is only good at “menial work” (Smith 368). The fact that he does not have the same class-enforcing expectation of Magid implies that the inflexibility of class expectations pressed on Irie has as much to do with her gender as her race.

The most complex interaction of race, class, and gender appears in *Brick Lane*, but it is also in *Brick Lane* where these interactions are most heavily papered over in service to a positive outcome. In Ali’s novel, it is Nazneen’s threefold status as a subaltern (she is black,

she is female, and she is working-class) that leads to her successfully establishing a home for herself in London. In particular, the combination of her gender and class leads to her establishment of her home textile business. Herein, however, lies a seeming and glaring contradiction: how can circumstances of oppression simultaneously be circumstances of empowerment? Even the most optimistic reading of Ali's novel inevitably begs the question of how well it reflects the realities of London's migrant textile workers, and whether or not it is feasible for an industry that heavily exploits the labour of female workers to lead to the independent entrepreneurship and empowerment of those workers. Nazneen's story can be read as overly-romanticized and it is important to note that it might not accurately reflect the cruel realities of textile labourers of colour in contemporary Britain. This romanticized representation of life in Brick Lane might render the novel unsuccessful in its didactic purpose. Regardless of its questionable basis in reality, however, *Brick Lane* is still a useful text to explore in terms of the apparent failure of the British colonial project to transform colonial citizens into British citizens, and the possibility for the self-identification of first-generation immigrants as British, as well as the establishment of a home space rather than a static hybrid identity.

Despite the complexities of the interrelation between class, gender, and race, and the degree to which reality is reflected in these narratives, the overall message shared by these three novels is clear: black Britons can and will achieve agency and space for self-definition in spite of racist attitudes and expectations directed at them by their white peers, as well as by white British authorities. They do so by rejecting the fixity of personal, cultural, racial, and national identity in favour of the realization that all such identities are malleable constructs, to be altered, tried on, played out, and discarded according to personal choice and subjective circumstance. According to these novels, at least some of these new Britons are capable of

seeing past the old stereotypes to a new vision of what it means to be British in a postcolonial era, and the novels also suggest that white Britain must follow suit. As Hanif Kureishi writes,

It is the British, the white British, who have to learn that being British isn't what it was. Now it is a more complex thing, involving new elements. So 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. Much thought, discussion and self-examination must go into seeing the necessity of this, what this 'new way of being British' involves and how difficult it might be to attain. (Kureishi "Rainbow" 38)

Additionally, each novel reminds us that this redefinition of Britishness is not a process with a necessary end, for such would simply mean a new ossification of British identity and a new set of essentialist dogmas that would inevitably limit individual agency. Each novel's conclusion is left open-ended: each of the three protagonists cannot simply rest on their laurels, secure in some ideal hybrid identity, but must continually strive for redefinition according to an ever-changing internal and external landscape of expectations, cultural practices, language, and social circumstances.

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