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“Why search the inner room”

Cultural and Hybrid Identity in Hanif Kureishi’s The Buddha of Suburbia and Zadie Smith’s White Teeth

Nanna Helle Nerland

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Department of Literature, Area Studies and
European Languages, Faculty of Humanities

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Abstract

This thesis explores the concepts of cultural identity and hybridity in literature, and how the development of identities can be understood as continuous process that never reaches completion. It does so through a close reading of two characters in two novels, namely the character of Karim Amir in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and the character of Irie Jones in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Smith and Kureishi depict the characters' transition from adolescence to adulthood, and their subsequent search for identity. By utilizing Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, and Homi Bhabha and Sten Pultz Moslund's theory of cultural hybridity, I propose that the shaping of the character's cultural and hybrid identities is a process continuously influenced and affected by history, cultures and heritage that prevent them from settling into any fixed state of being.

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1. Introduction

1.0 Thesis Aims and Structure

The aim of this thesis is to examine how the development of hybrid and cultural identities are presented in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). A common conception is that in the development of our identities, we are, as Stuart Hall puts it, "going forward to meet that which we always were" ("Ethnicities" 69), to develop into our true selves. However, in this thesis, I propose that the development of *The Buddha's* Karim Amir and *White Teeth's* Irie Jones' cultural identities never reach a final state of completion but should be understood as a continuous process. This process is constantly influenced by cultures and history, both contemporary and past. Furthermore, I argue that the two novels differ in their depiction of the identity process. *The Buddha of Suburbia* tracks an identity development oriented towards the future and contemporary society. In contrast, *White Teeth* reflects on the role that the past and history play in developing hybrid and cultural identities.

I have chosen these two specific novels because Smith and Kureishi both explore the state of culture and hybridity in 20th-century England. The characters of Karim Amir and Irie Jones can be defined as hybrid individuals in that they are of mixed ethnicities, and the two novels depict the condition of growing up and existing in-between different cultures. Irie and Karim must negotiate and navigate England's perception of them as hybrid individuals, and their own ideas of culture, history and identity. My reason for choosing this scope is that it offers interesting perspectives on how cultures and history affect us as beings. This can further help us to understand how our identities develop in a world where cultures and histories are becoming increasingly fused and intertwined.

In the first chapter, I will present the primary theoretical concepts for this thesis. The main part of the thesis is structured into two chapters, and the novels will be analyzed in chronological order after their year of publication. The second chapter focuses on *The Buddha of Suburbia* and examines how Karim Amir's exploration of contemporary London in the 1970s shapes his cultural identity. Chapter three is a close reading of *White Teeth's* Irie Jones and of how the rediscovery of the past influences the development of present cultural identities.

1.1 Migration in the Twentieth Century

It is principally agreed upon amongst modern theorists, writers and historians that the twentieth century was a century of migration. Some even argue that migration and spatial mobility have become the norm, replacing previous notions of home as a stable and immobile concept. Salman Rushdie suggests that “the distinguishing feature of our time is mass migration” (Rushdie qtd. in Moslund 1), and Zadie Smith asserts that the twentieth century was “the century of the great immigrant experience” (Smith 236). There are several reasons for the ongoing mass migration; global and regional wars, colonization and decolonization have led to forced migration and states of exile, while technological, cultural and economic developments have enabled more opportunities for spatial movement. Whether it be refugees, exiles, migrant workers, globetrotters, or simply tourists, there is no denying that the world’s population has become a mobile one.

The increase in migration has further resulted in a shift in people’s perception of their own identity and their spatial and cultural belonging. We no longer only rely on past and fixed notions of stable identities and identity markers connected to a geographical and historical culture or places of origin. Thus, we must also replace the fixed and essentialist binaries we once used to identify with. By relinquishing fixed and traditional ways of creating an identity based only on origin, birthplace, or nationality, we allow for a broader identification process, wherein foreign and familiar cultures and traditions influence how we view ourselves and our belonging.

Following the Second World War, Great Britain saw a substantial increase in immigration, primarily from former Caribbean and South-Asian colonies due to the 1948 British Nationality Act. In theory, the act gave all citizens of the British Commonwealth an English passport, making it significantly easier to migrate for those who had the means to do so. The Caribbean migrants mainly moved due to poverty-driven reasons. The South-Asian migrants, primarily Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, often had some high local standing in their former home, and few were considered poor (Brown 44; Dawson 4). As for Britain, the post-war years and decolonization process severely diminished the nation’s international and political position from a global superpower to an economically and imperialistically defeated nation in the shadows of the United States and the European Union. Due to the economic toils of the two world wars and the materialistic damage done to the nation’s infrastructure, Britain was in severe debt in the post-war years. In their need for cheap

industrial labor, they looked to skilled and unskilled immigrant workers to help in the reconstruction of their country (Brown 40).

Migration further increased in the 1960s and 70s, and the Caribbean and South-Asian diasporas were predominantly established in the suburban areas around the major cities, particularly in the neighborhoods surrounding London (Brown 45). Although Britain, in theory, opened its doors for post-war immigration, assimilation into English society was neither easy for immigrants nor particularly welcomed by the white English population. The objective truth of Britain's national identity and self-perception can be debated, yet a common conception is that Britain as a nation viewed itself as pure and homogenous prior to 1939. The idea of a pure and white English identity was reinforced by a surge in nationalism and a proud sense of "Britishness" following the Second World War. Additionally, circumstances such as the country's significant economic decline, decolonization and the subsequent collapse of British imperialism further fueled the fire. The inherent and fixed British identity relied on the notion of racial and cultural superiority. It primarily consisted of having white skin, sharing a Protestant culture, and a sense of proud connection to the monarchy (Brown 119; Dawson 6). These beliefs were further shared by politicians such as Enoch Powell and Duncan Sandys, who propagated ideas of "voluntary repatriation" of immigrants and "the breeding of ... half-caste children" which would end in "a generation of misfits" (Powell qtd. in Kureishi, "Rainbow" 42). However, Dawson argues that the aspects of this national identity lacked a historical foundation, and the migration of former colonial subjects forced the nation to confront its imperialist and heavily racist history (6). The decolonization and subsequent increase in immigration contributed to the deconstruction of Britain's fixed conceptions of race, social class, gender and sexuality. Thus, the diasporas of former British colonies expanded and ultimately changed the entire meaning and ideas of British identity.

1.2 Migration Literature

In this thesis, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* are placed within the genre of migration literature. The exact definition of the term "migration literature" is debated and disputed. Søren Frank proposes that it includes all works of literature that reflect on migration, written in an age of migration (Frank 2). The literature, then, does not have to be written by authors who have personally experienced migration, nor does the motif need to be physical and spatial movement. Instead, Frank views migration as "*oscillatory and inconclusive processes ... in relation to personal, national, and cultural identity, language,*

narrative form and enunciation” (8). This view of migration enables the genre of migration literature to move beyond the frameworks of postcolonial discourses and theory. However, I propose that Kureishi and Smith’s exploration of post-imperialist England draws a connection to postcolonial theory and literature. I will briefly explain what I mean by postcolonial literature and the distinction between postcolonial literature and migrant literature.

In 2000, Rushdie wrote that “a new novel is emerging, a post-colonial novel, de-centered, a transnational, inter-lingual, cross-cultural novel” (Rushdie qtd. in Moslund 3). This new novel can be traced back to postcolonial studies, which was officially established as an academic field in the 1980s. However, postcolonial discourses and literature have existed many years prior to this. The production of postcolonial literature and theory is fundamentally a result of the interaction between imperial nations and cultures and indigenous cultures and practices (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1). Even so, the theory and literature were first developed once colonized or formerly colonized people could reflect and write about the problematic and harmful aspects of colonialism. The pre-fix “post” may indicate a finished occurrence or event, yet this is not the case. Firstly, it is important to note that the processes of colonialism are very much at work in the world today. Postcolonial scholars and writers therefore study and describe how the aftermath of colonization affects contemporary society 80 years after the “fall” of the British Empire and examine modern occurrences of colonialism.

Older postcolonial literature tended to lean toward a reactive, anti-colonial angle, which served a specific purpose of informing and aiding the colonized subject in the fight for liberation from their oppressors (Moslund 2). Shortly after postcolonialism was established as a field of study, however, there occurred a shift in the themes and theorization of the literature. Rather than attaining an anti-colonial perspective, postcolonial writing shifted its focus to migration and the subsequent hybridity that migration could result in. Sten Moslund calls this a “migrant turn” within the postcolonial novel (2). Rather than viewing migration as a displacement due to colonialism, the new postcolonial novel, or migration novel, perceives the migrant as a positive product of a hybridization process. Often existing outside of essentialist binaries, the protagonist of migration literature offers new ways of being and becoming and new ways of shaping one’s identity. Hence, migration literature often provides progressive perspectives and ways of being rather than primarily shifting the power between oppressor and oppressed.

Migration literature is not only a further development of postcolonial literature, but

can also be understood as a symptom of the increase in migration and spatial movement in the last fifty years. Migrant authors have played a significant role in shaping contemporary literature, both in terms of narratives and themes. The increase in migration literature has also expanded the list of who actually writes this kind of literature. It was previously common, and perhaps even the norm that the authors of postcolonial fiction had performed a spatial movement and would build their literary work on personal experience with migration or colonialism. However, an increasing number of authors writing contemporary migration literature have never migrated beyond national borders, yet they still depict migration and its consequences in their writing (Frank 11). This is especially prevalent in Britain, where new generations of former immigrants are establishing themselves as prolific writers of migration literature, and perhaps none more so than Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith. Although Kureishi is of Pakistani ethnicity, with a Pakistani father, and Smith is of Jamaican ethnicity, with a Jamaican mother, both authors were born, raised and still live in England. Still, their literature explores individuals' experiences with spatial movement across national borders, and both include a particular focus on the children of immigrants in Britain.

Therefore, Roy Sommer's definition of migration literature might be better suited to describe the literature of writers such as Kureishi and Smith, as he expands the definition of what migration literature can be. Instead of viewing it in an author-oriented manner, he suggests that the genre should perceive migration as a broader concept, functioning as a "metaphor for any inconclusive process" (Sommer qtd. in Frank 16). By doing so, the genre allows for a greater variety of plots and narratives, as migration must not necessarily entail a spatial movement and instead concerns movement between binaries in identities and hybridity. The distinction in the concept of migration is significant for this thesis, as I will be using postcolonial theory often applied to first-generation immigrants and their experience with hybridity and identity. However, I will be applying the theory to characters who, like their respective authors, have never migrated themselves, namely *The Buddha's* Karim Amir and *White Teeth's* Irie Jones. Nonetheless, the two characters share many similar experiences and perspectives with those who have had to relocate and create a new sense of belonging in a foreign country. Karim must develop and understand his hybrid identity within hostile spaces and Irie dreams of belonging to an imaginary homeland. Sommer, then, argues that migration literature, and more specifically the transcultural-hybrid novel, explores the theories of hybridity, cultural identities, and states of in-betweenness (qtd. in Frank 16). Consequently, Smith and Kureishi's works encapsulate the contemporary migrant novel, as their central themes are navigation and negotiation between different cultures, hybridity and identity.

1.3 Cultural Hybridity

As my thesis explores hybridity in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth*, I will continue with an exploration and explanation of the concept. In postcolonial studies, cultural hybridity is most often connected to the theory of Homi Bhabha, and I will partly utilize his theory in this thesis. However, Bhabha has also received extensive criticism and opposition, especially related to his view on the position of identity in-between binaries and the idea of cultural hybridity transcending into a third space. Therefore, this section will also examine a critique of Bhabha's theory of hybridity that will prove relevant for further analysis. Lastly, I will link these ideas of hybridity to Stuart Hall's theory on cultural identity.

Historically, 'hybridity' as a sociological and anthropological term stemmed from a nineteenth-century racist discourse, which propagated ideas of miscegenation and racial purity. In its most literal meaning, hybridity still entails a mixing or fusion of different components. However, the concept has undergone a re-evaluation in the 20th and 21st century and is now mainly a celebrated concept. It is applied to several discourses and academic fields, including sociology and anthropology, politics and history, and art forms such as literature, music and cinema. As this thesis will focus on *cultural* hybridity, I will view culture as presented in the words of Peter Burke: "attitudes, mentalities and values and their expression, embodiment or symbolization in artifacts, practices and representation" (5). Cultural hybridity, then, can be described as a "ferment which changes cultures" (Schaff 281). A specific example within culture and art is reggae music. A combination of African and North-American musical elements, reggae was introduced to Britain, where Steven Kapoor further combined it with Indian Bhangra music (Burke 25). Hence, reggae demonstrates how hybridization is a process that may never reach completion, in that different cultural components can be continuously added and fused with other elements, resulting in further developments of the music.

Homi Bhabha discusses cultural hybridity in relation to colonialism and postcolonialism. He examines the relationship between colonizer/colonized and argues that the cultures of the binary pair are continuously influencing and affecting one another. This meeting of cultures occurs in what Bhabha has coined the Third Space, which he describes as a liminal space comparable to a stairwell (Bhabha 5). The meeting of two or more cultures in the third space enables the creation and existence of new cultures and cultural meanings. In this "interstitial passage" (5), fixed binaries of cultures and identification merge, and this merging further enables a deconstruction of the binaries that support assumed hierarchies.

Thus, the merging of cultures in the third space deconstructs the binary pairs that colonial discourses rely on, such as occident versus orient or civilized and modern versus primitive.

Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the third space additionally criticizes how past conceptualization of Western historical identities has been based on a temporal dimension. He argues that "the value of culture as an object of study" (Bhabha 53) stems from a culture's capacity to assemble a unit of ideas and their evolution through time. However, the intervention of the third space, and its subsequent deconstruction of binaries, results in an ambivalence that eventually dismantles the unity or fixity of cultural value and meaning as constructed by Western civilizations (Bhabha 54). Cultures and identities should no longer be perceived as a homogenizing force that unifies a people on the notion of an authentic cultural past. In short, the third space displaces and corrupts the narrative which the western world utilizes to support their colonial history and identity.

Lastly, Bhabha explores the jointure between identity and hybridity. As his theory leans towards psychoanalytical criticism, the third space is also essential to the development of the self and cultural differences. In the third space, two or more subjects yield to each other's cultural differences, which can result in what Bhabha calls an "*international culture*" (56), meaning a hybrid space wherein the true meaning of culture lies. The yielding will empower and enrich subjects as cultural beings. Hence, by allowing ourselves to enter into the third space, in-between different cultures, people may "emerge as the others of our selves" (56). These selves do not rely on the concept of fixed, national and historical identities. Instead, they possess the possibility to create and negotiate their own meaning. Consequently, the engagement of the self in the interstitial passage between cultures also challenges normative development and progress and enables the subject to explore their identities beyond fixed binaries.

For this thesis, I will briefly examine the critique of Bhabha's theory as proposed by Sten Pultz Moslund. According to Moslund, the conceptualization of cultural hybridity in modern times has resulted in a "triumphant hybridity hype" (Moslund 13). He is critical of Bhabha's argument that the hybrid migrant exists in a transcendental third space, free from constricting binaries. When used in contemporary migrant literature, this position often results in the protagonist being perceived as a "migrant hero" that "transcends all centralisations of meaning and binary structures" (10). Furthermore, he proposes that when authors of migrant literature and postcolonial theorists uncritically celebrate ideas of movement and heterogeneity, they place these concepts in dialectical opposition to rootedness and stable identities. The theory of hybridity becomes contradictory; in the deconstruction of fixed

binaries, a dichotomy between hybridity and purity is established. This becomes problematic when related to the idea of cultures and cultural hybridity, as the cultures on each side of the third space are subjected to an imposed homogeneity and fixity. It disregards the “historical inevitability of cultural mixture and heterogeneity” (34), which exists in all cultures, hybrid or not. Similarly, this view suggests that the migrant subject can become a truly hybrid subject, yet only if they relinquish any notion of polarized sameness in terms of ethnicity, nationality and so forth (34).

Moslund also disagrees with the idea of hybridity as a finalized state of being one can reach by relinquishing any fixed identity markers. Instead, hybridity should be seen as a process, as *hybridization*, that favors a continuous state of *becoming*. For this to be possible, we should not think of binary pairs, i.e. rooted/rootless or heterogeneity/homogeneity, as separated concepts that must be fused into a third hybrid concept. On the contrary, we can think of the dichotomous poles as being in an asymmetrical relationship, wherein they continuously contaminate and influence one another irregularly (Moslund 14). For instance, a person can be rooted in past cultures and history while simultaneously attempting to create a sense of identity and belonging in the present. This understanding of hybridity is significant for this thesis, as I later propose that the characters of *The Buddha* and *White Teeth* are continuously shaped by, yet never transcend above, different cultures and histories. Lastly, perceiving hybridity as such removes the idea that identities can reach a final and transcendental state of being. Moslund’s idea of hybridity as a process can be compared to Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity, and this introduction will conclude with an examination of Hall’s theory.

1.4 Cultural Identity

Although their structures and narratives are significantly different, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* depict Karim and Irie’s transition from adolescence to adulthood. Consequently, the character’s development relates to a hybridization process and the process of shaping one’s identity and locating a secure sense of self. The concept of identity is extensive, and I will be focusing on the development of *cultural* identity as theorized by Stuart Hall. Identity may be constructed through recognition or shared characteristics with other people or an ideal (Hall, “Who Needs Identity?” 2). However, the question Hall poses is how displacement and ruptures, and the lack of connection to a coherent past, influence the shaping of cultural identities. The increase in migration requires new methods of

understanding how identities are constructed because identities in modern times are “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different ... discourses, practices and positions” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 3). The novels in question support this statement, and the hybridity of Karim and Irie turns their identity formation into complex processes of negotiation and navigation between cultures and history. Therefore, my analysis will use Hall’s theory on how rupture and continuation shape cultural identities, as proposed in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1994). The reason for this choice lies in how Hall, like Moslund, perceives the formation of identity as a continuous process that is never settled or completed.

In the essay, Hall proposes two ways of thinking about cultural identity; identity as sameness and continuation and identity as rupture and difference. The first model perceives the formation of identities in relation to history and defines it in terms of a “collective ‘one true self’ ... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Hall, “Cultural Identities” 223). This position proposes that cultural identities are shaped through collective historical and cultural experiences, which provide one with a sense of belonging to a unified people. Although identities based on sameness have been criticized for being essentialist, they also enable a sense of unity and belonging for people and nations subjected to ruptures and incoherency throughout history. Here, Hall refers to Franz Fanon’s argument that colonization distorted and destroyed the past of colonized and oppressed people (223). By creating a unified cultural identity based on shared values and experiences, oppressed or formerly oppressed people are given “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (223), which may be more favorable than the ruptured framework of a nation or people’s actual history.

Hall asserts that shared history is an intrinsic part of our cultural identity, yet he is critical of how we perceive said history. Rather than understanding it as factually grounded events of the past, history should be understood as a constructed narrative that positions us as subjects in contemporary times. This argument is supported by Jonathan Friedman, who claims that objective history is a social construct in that every retelling of the past is told from a certain perspective (Friedman 143). Seeing history as such also allows us to choose how we position ourselves in terms of past narratives. Therefore, the sameness and history that people construct their cultural identities on is a past we actively recreate: “Making history is a way of producing identity insofar as it produces a relation between what has supposedly occurred in the past and the present state of affairs” (Friedman 118). However, Hall is positive about the retelling of the past. He believes that history should not be thought of as an archeological find

buried by the colonial experience, which, once unearthed, will offer the subject a sense of an inherited identity (Hall, “Cultural Identities” 225). On the contrary, the subject can negotiate and recreate a new yet continuous cultural identity by actively engaging with history and past cultures.

A question to consider regarding the first model of cultural identity, however, is how displaced and diasporic people can create a coherent cultural identity. To answer this, Hall proposes a second model of cultural identity wherein the focus is on rupture and discontinuity. The essay primarily focuses on Jamaican cultural identity and the ruptures caused by colonialism that ensued in a global diaspora. Hall argues that the rupture within Jamaican culture and history is equally as inherent to Caribbean cultural identity and “uniqueness” as continuity and cultural sameness. The displacement and violence caused by colonialism have shaped the cultures of the Caribbean in fundamental ways, and ruptures such as these continue to shape cultural identity even in contemporary history (“Cultural Identities” 225). Identity formation, then, does not only adhere to sameness but is also shaped by “critical points and significant *difference*” (225). This ‘difference’ removes the notion that identity is only based on connection and similarity and introduces the concept of identity as a continuous process. Hence, the binary pair of *being* and *becoming* is established. The former relates to the shared culture mentioned above, whereas ‘becoming’ entails a transformation that occurs when identities are in continuous play with other cultures, histories and powers (225). As culture and history are never finished, the formation of cultural identities, as with hybridization, will never reach a finalized state of being.

Thus, the opposite poles of the binary pairs being/becoming and continuity/rupture, are both active in the formation of cultural identities. Hall describes the process as follows: “We might think of black Caribbean identities as ‘framed’ by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture” (Hall, “Cultural Identities” 226). This enables cultural identity to be grounded in the past while simultaneously reminding us that “difference ... persist – in and alongside continuity” (227). In this thesis, I propose that the rupture of colonialism also affects the cultural identities of Irie and Karim, despite not having directly experienced displacement. It becomes visible in their lack of connection to their surroundings and their subsequent search for belonging, either in the future or in the past.

2. *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990)

2.0 Chapter Introduction

The themes of hybridization and cultural identity are prominent from the very first sentence of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, as the novel's protagonist, Karim Amir, introduces himself with the much-quoted line: "I am an Englishman born and bred, almost" (Kureishi, *Buddha* 3). Having been born in Britain to an English mother and an Indian father, Karim possesses a hybrid identity which he describes as a "new breed, having emerged from two old histories" (3) with an "odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, belonging and not" (3). The use of the word "almost" in his introduction establishes Karim's ambivalence towards his hybridity and identity, and he begins the story with a reluctance to examine his identity, roots, and belonging. Being neither proud of his English heritage nor having much knowledge or connection to his Indian heritage, the 17-year-old boy sees no purpose in examining his "inner room" (3). Consequently, Karim distracts himself by being in constant motion between people and spaces and therefore avoids any kind of self-examination.

The novel spans almost a decade, beginning in the early 1970s and ending just ahead of Thatcher's first term of office in 1979. The structure of *The Buddha* is bipartite; part one occurs "In the Suburbs" (Kureishi, *Buddha* 1), and part two "In the City" (123), which establishes a dialectical opposition between the two neighborhoods (Bentley 162). The development of Karim's identity happens parallel to his spatial journey between the suburbs and central London, and the motifs of physical and psychological mobility have led to the novel being classified by several critics as a bildungsroman (Bentley 161; Moslund 5). In short, the bildungsroman depicts the protagonist's physiological growth, often through a spatial journey. Although it is a contested genre and term within literary criticism, I will also analyze the novel as such, utilizing Bakhtin and Moretti's theories on the bildungsroman. I have chosen this as Kureishi focuses on the importance of history and contemporary culture and society in the formation of Karim's identity, and Bakhtin and Moretti both view modernity as a central aspect of the bildungsroman. Karim's unwillingness to examine his roots and heritage at the beginning of the novel results in a restless fixation on developing his identity along with the emergence of history and new cultures, and he believes that the possibilities of the future will secure his sense of self. Although both Bakhtin and Moretti developed their theories in line with older concepts of the bildungsroman, I suggest that these

theories can be applied to Karim's future-oriented development and journey from adolescence to adulthood.

Moretti divides the bildungsroman into two separate forms based on plot differences which he calls the classification and the transformation principle (Moretti 7), and I argue that *The Buddha* adheres to the latter. The classification principle relies on finality, and the narrative is given meaning when the novel reaches a definite ending. On the other hand, the transformation principle of the bildungsroman focuses on narrativity being an open-ended process (7). It is the narrative, and not the final solution of it, that gives the novel meaning. The transformation principle enables the novel to move away from a more traditional "happy" ending, which in the case of the bildungsroman would entail a finalized process of development and self-discovery. It favors progression over tradition, and Moretti argues that the protagonist that adheres to the transformation principle sees the conclusion of maturity (marriage, family) as a betrayal of youth that would bereave rather than enrich one's youth of meaning (11). The notion that the development of the subject's identity does not need to be finalized corresponds to Hall's theory on cultural identities as an ongoing process, which is a recurring motif in postcolonial and migrant literature in the 20th and 21st century.

The bildungsroman has been thoroughly criticized for its strictly normative discourse and structure that predominantly included a Eurocentric, masculine, and heteronormative focus. This has led to questions concerning the use of the genre in non-western literature because, as Maria Helena Lima argues, the bildungsroman has "help[ed] to reproduce the cultural imperialism that inevitably separates the Third World intellectual from the community and culture of his or her birth" (Lima qtd. in Hoagland 219). Nonetheless, as both the bildungsroman and migrant literature have occurring themes of search for identity and belonging, the novel of formation is kept alive and well within postcolonial literature (Boes 239). Still, the postcolonial bildungsroman is more thorough in its critique of culture and history, and the genre no longer regards society as stable and normative constructs that the protagonist needs to uncritically adapt to if they are to develop themselves (240).

In his theory of the bildungsroman, Bakhtin describes a literary structure called "the fifth novel of emergence" (Bakhtin 23). The fifth novel critiques how the bildungsroman has perceived history as a stable construct separated from the protagonist's development. Instead, it proposes that the subject's process of becoming is linked to the emergence of history and society. The subject reflects the history and societal changes by transitioning from one point in time, or one epoch, to another and entering a "new, *spatial* sphere of historical existence" (23-24). I argue that both Moretti's transformation principle and Bakhtin's fifth type can be

applied to the postcolonial and migrant bildungsroman. They offer an opportunity to explore the themes of identity and belonging while also critiquing colonial history and imperialism, and *The Buddha* is no exception. Several aspects of Karim's journey mirror the classical bildungsroman in that it tells of a young man who seeks his fortune in the city and subsequently experiences an educational lesson in the ways of the world (Frow, Hardie and Smith 1906). However, the novel is also highly critical of English society and culture. *The Buddha* follows the structure of Bakhtin's fifth novel of emergence as it examines the historical development of London from the early to late 1970s, and the city and Karim's development becomes intrinsically connected. Mark Stein also proposed that the Black British Bildungsroman describes not only personal transformation but also the transformation of British society (Stein qtd. in Boes 240), which in the latter half of the twentieth century meant new ways of being British, both in terms of ethnicity, social class, sexuality and gender.

In this chapter, I hope to show how *The Buddha of Suburbia* uses the form of the bildungsroman to reflect on the formation of Karim's cultural and hybrid identity. Karim develops his identity alongside the emergence of contemporary history and culture, and the novel explores how the formation of identity can move beyond what is inherited from past generations. Furthermore, by reading the novel in the light of Moretti's transformation principle, this chapter argues that *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a bildungsroman removes itself from a normative structure of development. This opens for the possibility of perceiving cultural identities and hybridity as a continuous process of becoming rather than a finalized state of being. As mentioned, the novel's bipartite structure accentuates the development of Karim's identity through his movement, and my analysis will follow the novel's temporal structure. It will begin with a reading of Karim's identity and position in the suburbs before continuing the analysis with a reading of how the journey to Central London affects and changes Karim's cultural identity and hybridization process. This will enable a clearer understanding of how *The Buddha* tracks a development of a hybrid and cultural identity that is primarily oriented towards contemporary culture and the future, rather than rediscovering and adopting a cultural identity in the past.

2.1 Stagnation in the Suburbs

Spatiality is a central motif in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and the social and geographical spaces of urban and suburban London are prominent in the identity formation of Karim. Through cultural exploration and social interactions with these spaces, the novel depicts how

contemporary English culture, or the lack thereof, influences Karim's choices and movement. The novel begins in the suburbs of Bromley, south of central London, and both Kureishi and Smith utilize the cultural spaces of London's suburbs as a catalyst for their protagonist's eventual identity development.

In his introduction of the suburbs, Karim depicts Bromley as a homogeneous neighborhood wherein mediocrity and unhappiness thrive and describes it as a place where "people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness. It was all familiarity and endurance: security and safety were the reward of dullness" (Kureishi, *Buddha* 8). In *Reading London's Suburb* (2015), Ged Pope proposes that the suburbs, despite being marketed as a safe space for the middle-class family away from the turmoil of the central city, rarely have been depicted as homely within English literature. On the contrary, the suburbs symbolize an almost alien uniformity and homogeneity, which historian Lewis Mumford describes as a "multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at a uniform distance, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group" (qtd. in Pope 1-2). As a young boy with a strong urge to seek out contemporary countercultures, Karim perceives the mundane routine of the suburbs as suffocating and stagnating. Additionally, Bromley is predominantly white and straight, and by inhabiting a mixed ethnicity and identifying as queer, Karim falls outside the heteronormative and homogenous norms and boundaries of the uniform middle-class population.

Furthermore, the rigid norms of the suburbs signify the entrenchment and stagnation of British society in the post-war and post-imperialist years. In his reading of the novel, Nahem Yousaf refers to a statement made by U.S. Secretary Dean Acheson in 1962, who claimed that Britain as a nation had failed in finding a new role following the loss of its colonial empire (Yousaf 51). The post-imperialist nation existed in limbo between the past and the present, wherein any sense of a coherent and modern English identity became unidentifiable. Kureishi explores the post-imperial Englishness in the novel, and the majority of the suburban population in Bromley is either characterized by a sense of defeatedness or believes in a racist, imperialist image of Britain as propagated by politicians such as Enoch Powell. These rigid and discriminating ideas of inherent Englishness provide an impetus for Karim's eventual escape to the city. Two characters represent these ideas, namely Karim's mother and the blatantly racist character of Hairy Back.

The relationship between Karim and his parents, Margaret and Haroon, is a central motif in the novel, and Karim's ambivalence towards his own cultural identity connects to his perception of his parents. The English identity Karim perceives within his mother mirrors

Pope's description of the stereotypical English suburbanite as "melancholy, frustrated [and] petty" (Pope 7). Margaret's ambition in life is to blend in with the surrounding people and places, and there is a visible contrast between her sense of insignificance and Karim's need for connection and attention. The contrast creates a fractured relationship between mother and son, affecting the perception Karim has of his inherited English identity.

Susie Thomas argues that Margaret is the pinnacle of "an utterly defeated sense of ... Englishness" (Thomas 65), which can be understood as a result of the loss of cultural centralization and the failure to create new cultural meaning and values. Yet it is not only defeated that characterizes her but also a detrimental loss of confidence and sense of self. She creates an image of herself as monotonous and prosaic, and believes that her lack of a foreign ethnicity alienates her from her husband's new Buddhist community. Consequently, she shamefully identifies herself as "only English" (Kureishi, *Buddha* 5), and bursts into tears at the dinner table while crying that nobody understands that her life is "terrible, terrible!" (19). The entire Amir-family is seemingly unhappy in their suburban state of being, yet Haroon and Karim have an incentive to improve their mundane lives. Haroon eventually leaves Margaret and the suburbs, replacing her with the eccentric and confident Eva Kays. As Karim follows them into the city, Margaret is unable to keep up and struggles to shape her life and find new meaning without her family.

Although Karim pities his mother, he is also angered by her weakness and passive identity and wonders why "she couldn't be stronger? Why wouldn't she fight back?" (19). As a boy intensely searching for a more secure sense of self and his cultural identity, Karim becomes afraid to inherit Margaret's sense of insignificance, lifelessness and defeated Englishness. Upon visiting her following the separation of their family, his wish to distance himself from her Englishness is so prevalent that he fears physical contact with his own mother: "I was reluctant to kiss my mother, afraid that somehow her weakness and unhappiness would infect me" (105). Consequently, I suggest that when Karim dismissively introduces himself as "English ... (though not proud of it)" (3), it is, in part, the collapsed post-war and post-imperial Englishness inherited from his mother he loathes. This further causes confusion as the sameness and continuity within his inherited English cultural identity are based on indistinguishable or outdated cultural values. The culture his mother represents is a culture seemingly unable to advance alongside the modern world. Consequently, as a hybrid subject set on forward motion and development, there is nothing to gain for Karim from what his mother represents or offers.

The problems of developing the idea of an English identity in line with modern

developments and politics of multiculturalism are most prominent in the character Hairy Back; a proclaimed Powell supporter who disapproves of Karim dating his white daughter Helen by telling him that “We don’t want you blackies coming to the house” (Kureishi 40). Although both Margaret and Hairy Back signify a static Englishness, it is important to emphasize that where a prominent sense of post-war defeatedness defines Margaret’s English identity, Hairy Back clings on to a far more racist and nationalistic idea of identity, defined by a lasting image of the nation’s imperial past. Schoene argues that Hairy Back represents the English colonizers’ inability to deal with the loss of cultural centrality, who now “suffer from severe cultural dislocation” (Schoene 112) due to their degradation into politically insignificant suburban subjects. Furthermore, the middle-class’s displacement is “exacerbated by the fact they now see their socioeconomic status... and national identity challenged by immigrant populations from the British ex-colonies” (Schoene 112). Thus, they respond to this threat by attempting to assert what they believe is a collective national identity grounded in Britain’s past imperialism, as it may create the feeling of a stabilized sense of self. Yet the only argument Hairy Back can use against Karim is that of the color of his skin, which affirms both Brown and Dawson’s argument that the supposed identity in the post-war era relied only on racial and cultural superiority tied to white skin and Protestantism (Brown 113; Dawson 6).

As Karim fails to feel a connection or belonging to his English past, his cultural heritage and identity are defined by significant differences instead of sameness. The Englishness present in the middle-class suburbs of South London creates a narrow space in terms of accepted social norms and cultures, and rather than searching for cultural continuity in his English cultural identity, Karim must define himself in terms of what he is *not*. Hall views cultural identities in relation to the binary pair of Self versus Other and argues that the subject’s identity only becomes clear when compared to the Other (Hall, “Ethnicities” 69). Hairy Back imposes the role of the Other onto Karim by using racial slurs such as “blackie”, which isolates Karim from white Englishness and positions Hairy Back in the dominant regime of white representation. The othering performed by Hairy Back is an act of racism that illustrates how cultural identities are constantly affected by power and, in this case, lingering discourses of colonial history. Although it is a gesture that ultimately undermines Karim’s sense of belonging, it is also significant for the shaping of his cultural identity as it triggers Karim’s choice to leave the suburbs.

Furthermore, Karim is physically assaulted by Hairy Back’s Great Dane, a scene that

is only the first of many in which Karim is “literally and figuratively fucked by white society” (Fisher 289). Although the traumatic experience of verbal and physical abuse inflicts shame, resulting in Karim feeling “fucking bad-tempered” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 41), he fails to reflect on his emotional reaction to the assault. Karim’s reluctance to examine his identity at the beginning of the novel extends to an unwillingness to examine how traumatic experiences affect him. He defines himself as a “real shaker and trembler” who, when being subjected to racist abuse, “practically thanked [the abuser] for not making me chew the moss between the paving stones” (53). However, this character trait evolves as Karim’s educational journey progresses and his sense of self becomes more secure. Shortly before he leaves the suburbs, Karim spots Hairy Back and his dog again, yet this time he reflects on his own delayed emotional response to the abuse: “How could he stand there so innocently when he’d abused me? I suddenly felt nauseous with anger and humiliation – none of the things I’d felt at the time” (101). This specific development of his identity can be seen in the light of Bakhtin’s theory of the fifth novel of emergence. Instead of perceiving society as an immobile construct one must adapt and submit to, the subject of the fifth novel reflects the historical emergence of the world (Bakhtin 23). The protagonist is forced to develop alongside the contemporary formation of society. Rather than dwelling on the abuse, Karim uses his anger as a motivation to escape the conservative and socially stagnated neighborhood of Bromley: “I knew it did me good to be reminded of how much I loathed the suburbs... I had to continue my journey into London and a new life... away from people and streets like these” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 101). Margaret and Hairy back represent a world that seems to remain in the past and is incapable of emerging alongside modern history. For Karim to perform his educational journey and develop his identity along with contemporary culture, he must escape the confines of a past in which he does not belong.

Karim’s father, Haroon, also triggers Karim’s journey away from the suburbs. Restlessness and fear of growing old ignite Haroon’s interest in Buddhist philosophy, a hobby he shares with the culturally lost yet resolute Eva. Eva offers Haroon and Karim a way out of the suburbs in exchange for cultural replenishment consisting of appropriated Indian and orientalist cultures. Haroon represents an opportunity to shape one’s cultural identity, which Karim wishes to possess. He describes his father as a man who “liked to stand out like a juggler at a funeral” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 42) and admires his deviation from the suburban norms and the subsequent attention and power he receives in return. Still, there is a discontinuity in Karim’s cultural identity and his Indian ethnicity, as Haroon never passed on aspects of his Indian past and culture to his son. Following his migration to England, Haroon

attempted, with minor success, to assimilate into a perceived Englishness by working for the Civil Service and reading Lord Byron. Subsequently, he eventually lost or cut ties to his Indian past and culture. However, in *Eva*, Haroon discovers an opportunity to enter English society not based on assimilation into the static white middle-class but by presenting and selling an appropriated Buddhist and Indian cultural identity. The suburbanites to whom he sells this idea perceive his Buddhist and philosophical show as an exotic alternative that can give their lives new meaning.

However, Haroon fails to realize that the cultural differences he promotes are grounded in a western perception of Indian culture and orientalism, which reinforces the colonial discourse of fixed cultures. *Eva*'s promotion of a stereotypical Indian culture becomes an assertion of power. The act of deciding which aspects of Indian culture Haroon can adopt and she can appropriate emulates the binary structured discourse of colonialism in that a white English community finds new ways to control a former colonized culture. Karim, too, is forced to perform a stereotypical reenactment of Indian culture in his first job as an actor, playing Mowgli in a theater production of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. He is cast based on authenticity, yet he is not authentic *enough* due to his hybrid identity. Karim must appropriate a mock-Indian accent, wear a loincloth, and cover his "creamy" skin in brown paint to adhere to the director Shadwell's racist idea of an authentic Indian boy. Bhabha writes that "fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference ... connotes rigidity and unchanging order" (94). In relation to colonialism, the fixity of cultures becomes a method of asserting power by perceiving colonized cultures as fundamentally primitive in opposition to the civilized colonizer. *Eva* and Shadwell's ideas of Indian culture rely on colonial fixity and further reinforce harmful stereotypes. The stereotype becomes an "arrested, fixated form or representation ... denying the play of difference" (Bhabha 107) between cultures and identities in colonial discourse. It further creates problems of identification in social relations for the individual subjected to stereotypes, as the room for identification is static and limiting (107).

Karim completes the performance yet subverts the stereotype by switching between the Indian accent and "suddenly relapsing into cockney at odd times" (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 158). In his analysis, Schoene sees this act in relation to Judith Butler's argument on how the parody of a stereotype shows that the stereotype is not grounded in any fundamental origin (Schoene 121). Hence, Karim's act of mocking Shadwell's authenticity destabilizes the colonial stereotype. Still, both Haroon and Karim must negotiate and navigate their own confused sense of Indianness and others', often stereotypical, perceptions of them and their

Indian ethnicity. For Haroon, the appropriation and stereotypical Indian culture truly resonates and allows him a reconnection with his Indian past, and at the end of the novel he contemplates his position in England: “I have lived in the West for most of my life ... yet I remain to all intents and purposes an Indian man” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 263). He eventually reacquires a more secure sense of his Indian self that enables him to critique the English culture he has attempted to assimilate into for so many years: “There is domination all round ... Yet there is something missing ... [a] great hole in your way of life” (264). For Karim, however, this is not the case. Susie Thomas writes that *The Buddha* shows how national identity primarily becomes a “matter of performance” (Thomas 67). Although the color of Karim’s skin signifies a seemingly inescapable Indian ethnicity to the outside world, he never locates a strong connection to his Indian heritage. If anything, what he inherits from Haroon is the realization that if he is to obtain the “additional personality bonus of an Indian past” (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 213), Karim must, as Thomas argues, construct and perform it himself.

Karim’s identity prior to his spatial movement and educational journey from the suburbs into the city is severely discontinuous and confusing, as he feels little connection to his parent’s heritage or the spaces around him. One could view his situation at this point in the novel as an opportunity to adhere to the idea of cultural hybridity and identity as a “pick-’n’-mix, boundary-crossing experience” (Pieterse, “Hybridity” 3), wherein he chooses which aspects of his Englishness and Indianness he wishes to identify with. Yet as a subject attempting to evolve alongside contemporary culture, this view becomes problematic when the cultures he can pick from are severely anachronistic and racist. If Karim is to explore and locate his cultural and hybrid identity, he must move beyond the confines of the suburbs, his family and childhood home. Thus, the spatial journey of the bildungsroman enables Kureishi to explore how Karim can evolve without being too bound to the sameness of past heritage and experience.

2.2 Becoming in the City

Part one of the novel establishes Karim as a hybrid individual, and I propose that the most significant aspects of his identity development occur in the second part of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, “In the City” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 123). As Karim ventures into central London’s spaces and upper classes, Moretti’s transformation principle becomes visible in the novel’s structure. In the progression of Karim’s educational journey, the novel becomes increasingly critical of the notion of a stable hybrid and cultural identity. Rather than aiming toward a

finalized state of being, he examines how changes in society and history result in an unfinished, constant state of becoming. Slowly, both Karim and the reader realize that his educational journey will not adhere to the normative structure of the classical bildungsroman, and Karim's development is far more complex than a straightforward escape from the suffocating suburbs to the liberating city (Pope 156). This structure further allows *The Buddha* to continue a critical view of English society, and the novel's second part has a stronger focus and critique of social class and the connection between class and race.

The motif of social class is primarily told through Karim's romantic relationship with the upper-class actress Eleanor, whom Karim meets as he continues his acting career. Eleanor is the daughter of an American banker and English painter. Her social circle is described as a "combination of class, culture and money" (Kureishi, *Buddha* 174), and she grew up in the company of the Queen Mother. Karim compares Eleanor to Eva Kays, claiming that Eva "would have given much to edge her body into the houses Eleanor had played in as a child" (173), yet this also applies to the protagonist himself. However, where Eva fails to realize that her suburban stigma is "in the blood and not the skin" (173), Karim eventually realizes that the social journey they both wish to accomplish involves more than attaining the right social connections. What they both lack, then, is intellectual capital acquired through continuous cultural education. In his attempts to blend in, Karim eventually acknowledges that his lower middle-class education has left him with a severe cultural and intellectual deficiency. He describes himself as an "empty intellectual void" (177), and this further results in self-hatred: "What infuriated me – what made me loathe both them and myself – was their confidence and knowledge" (177). Through Karim, the novel comments on the persistent problems of social immobility in England's class system. Rita Felski writes that *The Buddha* "traces the tenacity and continuing power of class distinctions" (Felski qtd. in Thomas 77), and a central aspect of this is the value put on education. Karim reflects on how education in the lower-middle-class and working-class has never been prioritized or seen as necessary, as his suburban classmates believe that their only career options are "a lifetime as a motor mechanic, or a clerk in an insurance firm" (Kureishi, *Buddha* 68). For the working- and lower-middle-classes, the essence of the upper classes becomes that of language one learns from birth; both he and Eva can attempt to require the vocabulary, yet they will never exceed the knowledge beyond that of a consciously acquired second language.

Karim's acting career continues to thrive following his stereotypical portrayal of Mowgli, and Kureishi further explore how race and class are intrinsically connected in his depiction of London's art scene. In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1991), Paul

Gilroy examines race and class, and he points to how racialization plays a vital part in the complex process of social classes: “The positions of dominant and subordinate groups are ascribed by race. It assigns and fixes their positions relative to each other and with respect to the basic structures of society” (Gilroy 29-20). He argues that in contemporary Britain, race and racism are active components in political, economic and cultural structures. Gilroy refers to Stuart Hall's argument on the same issue to describe the position of race in social class, namely that “race is the modality in which class is lived” (Hall, “Race” 216). Hall, then, proposes that race should be understood as a modality secondary to class. A person's race and class are intricately intertwined, but one's race also interferes with one's hierarchical position within a social class. This suggests that for Karim, as a mixed-race person, the possibility of entering the same social position as Eleanor will be practically impossible, as he is subjected to a severe disadvantage simply due to his ethnicity.

Racism, then, thrives in Central London as well, yet is inconspicuous under the pretense of posing as contemporary and radical art productions. Following his success as a stereotypical Indian Mowgli, Karim is hired by the director Matthew Pyke. Introduced as an avant-garde theater director, Pyke disguises his racism and classism in his theater production by presenting it as a story of “class, race, fucking and farce” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 189). Yet the upper classes of London, and primarily Eleanor and Pyke, fail to acknowledge and realize their advantageous position in society, resulting in fetishism and appropriation of lower social classes and minorities in England. To demonstrate, Eleanor appropriates aspects of the working class by dressing roughly and taking on a Catford accent. At the same time, she fails to acknowledge how her wealth and status affect her opportunities in life. When she wishes to further her acting career, she effortlessly replaces Karim with people of higher social status. Similarly, Pyke intends to use his art as a comment on the state of England, yet the only people he hires (apart from Karim) are upper-class actors “pretending to be working class, when their fathers are neuro-surgeons” (160). The difference in social class results in an uneven power balance in Karim's relationship with both Eleanor and Pyke, which culminates in an orgy between the three and Marlene, Pyke's wife. During their intercourse, Pyke sexually penetrates a partly unwilling Karim, an act Karim describes as “an imposition” (203). Fisher sees the act as “exploitative, objectifying sex in which power is exerted over Karim as an ‘exotic’ Other” (Fisher 289), hence drawing parallel to the humiliating assault he experiences from Hairy Back's Great Dane. Karim eventually realizes that he is being exploited, physically and mentally, and concludes that Pyke is “fucking [him] in other ways” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 219) than just sexually. Abuse of minorities is therefore not limited to

certain social classes, and as Gilroy argues, “Britain’s black population are subjected to particularly intense forms of disadvantaged and exploitation” (Gilroy 9-10).

Karim’s understanding of his position in society becomes apparent once he learns about Eleanor’s ex-boyfriend, Gene, a West-Indian actor who committed suicide. Marlene describes him as “very talented and sensitive” and “the best mime [Pyke] had ever met” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 201). Nevertheless, through the character of Gene, the novel accentuates Gilroy’s argument on England’s abuse of minorities: “The police were always picking [Gene] up and giving him a go over. Taxis drove straight past him. People said there were no free tables in empty restaurants” (201). Although Marlene is sympathetic towards Gene’s experience, the upper classes of England ignore systemic issues of racism and never admit to their own contribution to it. Pyke uses his avant-garde play to assert himself as a commentator on the state of the nation. At the same time, his production enhances racialized stereotypes while he claims that the only issue worth discussing in England is social class. Marlene, completely oblivious, thinks that Gene “lived in a bad world in nice old England” (201). Lastly, Eleanor, ridden by guilt over her boyfriend’s death, seemingly fails to understand the exploitation and abuse Gene was subjected to. It is eventually revealed that her relationship with Karim primarily functions as a coping mechanism for processing her guilt for Gene’s death, hence contributing and continuing the circle of exploitation and mental abuse. Their hypocrisy gives way when Karim invites Eleanor to a demonstration against fascism. However, rather than actively working against the system that instigated the racism that killed her boyfriend, she chooses to spend the day in the company of Pyke, a representative of the community that refused to hire Gene. The contemporary art scene completely fails to perceive any parallel between the racism Gene experienced and their own fetishism and exploitation of Karim. At best, their performed activism and political art can be understood as superficial attempts at social commentary. At worst, it becomes a detrimental contribution to a polarized society.

The racism Karim experiences from Eleanor and Pyke, albeit injurious, becomes a ruptured yet critical point in shaping his cultural identity. The abuse he suffers in his closest relationships results in alienation from society and people. Nevertheless, this alienation also furthers his development, and he eventually views the world in a less idealistic and childlike manner. Following Pyke’s sexual abuse, Karim reflects on the injustice he and Gene experience due to their ethnicity:

“We pursue 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?” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 227)

Connecting the different experiences of rupture in the novel thus far, Karim reflects on how his hybrid identity in English society positions him in an in-between space of belonging and not belonging and of rupture and continuation. As an English boy brought up in the suburbs, he will always be a part of England. Still, his belonging will never be on the same terms as that of a white Englishman. Karim claims what is rightfully his from the English society; he mocks the imperialists’ views of Hairy Back by initiating a relationship with his white daughter, and he disproves any classicist axioms of a destined career as a car mechanic by becoming a successful actor. By doing so, he confronts the dated and imperialist ideas of English identity. Karim’s formation happens parallel to the emergence of modern and progressive ideas. However, through the depiction of Karim’s identity process, Kureishi demonstrates that England as a society also must emerge and adapt to its multicultural population. In the personal essay “The Rainbow Sign” (1986; 2011) Kureishi writes that the British must “learn that British isn’t what it was” (92). Karim’s development, then, illustrates this statement. For the nation to develop, post-imperial England must look to its young, hybrid population to discover where its future lies.

Referring to Bhabha’s idea of the third space, Schoene argues that Karim resides in an “ethnicity-free-no-man’s-land” (Schoene 177), and his identity exists in a transcendental third space in-between English and Indian culture. Bhabha defines the Third Space as a place where different selves, such as Karim’s Indian and English self or suburban and urban self, succumb to their differences and re-emerge as a culturally enriched third self. However, I disagree with Schoene’s analysis of Karim’s position. Rather than locating his identity in a third, transcendental space, the paragraph above demonstrates that we should view his identity through a more asymmetrical discourse. Karim at times belongs and at times does not belong, his identity is shaped by continuity and sameness, but also critical points of difference and rupture, and as he moves into the different cultural and social spaces of London these dichotomous pairs are constantly in play with one another. Rather than viewing his belonging/not belonging and his sameness/rupture as finalized states of being, one can rather view them as Moslund proposes: “dichotomous poles [that] cease from serving as *states* or *conditions*, being reactivated, instead, as dynamic *forces*” (14). This view suggests that although Karim’s hybridity is an enriching aspect of his life that ultimately enables a broader

perspective on the world, it should not be viewed as a finalized and transcendental state of being.

Perceiving hybrid identities as a concept that can transcend into an “ethnicity-free-no man’s-land” additionally dismisses the racism Karim experiences due to his ethnicity and establishes what Benita Perry calls a “neutral, ideology-free zone” (Perry qtd. in Moslund 10) wherein colonial history and politics are ignored. Karim reflects on this point, stating that to be truly free and to reach a transcendental hybrid identity and a finalized state of belonging, one needs to free oneself from the “bitterness and resentment” (Kureishi, *Buddha* 227). The bitterness and resentment can be interpreted as the inescapable abuse Karim and Gene must suffer, yet also as Karim’s own emotional response and the alienation and hurt that erupts when one is being subjected to racism and acts of othering. Where he once imagined this to be possible if he only escaped the suburbs, he now realizes that his and Gene’s hybrid position in England, whether it be in the suburbs or the city, renders the idea of complete belonging impossible as bitterness in England is “generated afresh every day” (227). Even if Karim hopes to transcend into a third enriching form of culture, it will be impossible due to the inescapable ways that society, culture and history constantly affect and position him. Therefore, the shaping of Karim’s cultural identity and hybridity necessitates a constant negotiation and navigation of the dichotomous feelings of sameness and difference and belonging and not belonging.

2.3 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the development of Karim Amir’s cultural identity. *The Buddha of Suburbia* fits the structure of the bildungsroman and, more precisely, Moretti’s transformation principles. By reading the novel within Moretti’s framework, I have suggested that *The Buddha* illustrates that cultural identity should be understood as a constant becoming that will never be completed. Karim’s spatial movement from the suburbs becomes an educational journey that ultimately results in an awareness of his position as a hybrid individual in England. The novel’s bipartite structure accentuates the passage from adolescence to adulthood while concurrently commenting on the state of English society in the post-war and post-imperialist years. By exploring how several characters from different social and economic backgrounds affect and perceive Karim, the novel critiques nationalistic ideas of fixed and pure identities and the immobility in England’s class system. Karim is set

on developing alongside contemporary culture, which he does. However, for this to happen, England must emerge with him.

Although the identification process never reaches a state of transcendent 'being', Karim undergoes significant growth. His final reflection illustrates how he has grown into a more secure sense of self. Surrounded by friends and family, he cogitates on his maturation: "I could think about the past and what I'd been through as I'd struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is" (Kureishi, *The Buddha* 283-284). These final musings create a stark contrast to the perception of identity that characterized him in the suburbs. Where he once refused to examine and understand his hybridity and regarded his friends and family as methods of distractions, he can finally be still and reflect not only on the location of his heart but also on his past: "I thought of what a mess everything had been" (284). Although this realization may indicate a definite and even 'happy' ending, Karim admits to feeling "happy and miserable at the same time" yet hoping that "it wouldn't always be that way" (284), which opens for an extension of his journey. Hence, Moretti's transformation principle is again discernible in the narrative's open-ended structure.

Karim's hybridity places him in a position of in-betweenness that entails a necessary navigation and negotiation of class and culture, and power and history. He must maneuver between others and his own ideas of Englishness and Indianness, and the norms, structures and racism of the middle and upper classes. His identity and hybridity, his Indianness and Englishness, continuity and rupture, and belonging and not, are constantly fluctuating. This, then, is the continuous process of Karim's identity formation.

3. *White Teeth* (2000)

3.0 Chapter Introduction

White Teeth is Zadie Smith's first novel, and its publication positioned her as an essential member of the new British literary canon. Like *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the novel explores developments of Englishness in the 20th century and at the turn of the millennium (Knauer 172). The plot can be described as Dickensian, and Smith uses absurdism, stereotypes, and general exaggeration to explore the processes of hybridization and identity formation. *White Teeth* includes a more extensive list of intertwining histories and characters than *The Buddha*. Its temporal structure does not follow the strict linearity of Karim's story, as the narrative stretches and oscillates between 1857 to 1999. There is a wider focus on how historical narratives, either lived or constructed, influence processes of identification and hybridization. *The Buddha* partly compares the hybridization process of first-generation immigrants and their British-born children, yet the structure of Smith's novel opens for a more substantial analysis of the development that occurs from generation to generation.

A central motif in *White Teeth* is construction and the understanding of history, which is distinguishable in the structure and temporality of the novel. *White Teeth* follows three intersecting families; the English and Jamaican Jones/Bowden family, the Bangladeshi Iqbals, and eventually the Jewish, middle-class Chalfen clan. The novel is structured into four main chapters, each named after one or several members of the three different families. Additionally, the title of the main chapters includes two years, such as "Samad 1984, 1857" and "Irie 1990, 1907", hence establishing a definite timeline for the story. Although these main chapters primarily focus on the titular character, the narrative bounces between the past (the oldest year in the title) and the present and, at one point, allows the reader a glimpse seven years into the future. By using a non-linear temporality, Smith can also explore the heritage and characters' past to reflect on their present lives and experiences. This is primarily done in subchapters called "Root-Canals"; "The Root Canal of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal" explores the titular character's experience in the second world war, and "The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden" explores the birth of Irie Jones' grandmother, Hortense Bowden, in Jamaica in 1907.

Evidently, *White Teeth*'s structure and narrative are more complicated than *The Buddha*'s. Where the latter uses the first-person narrative of Karim, Smith's use of a third-person narrative continuously shifts the focus and provides the novel with more than one

protagonist. In this chapter, however, the focus will be on the identity formation and hybridization process of Irie Jones. Although *White Teeth* cannot be said to follow the same structure of the bildungsroman as *The Buddha*, there are several similarities between Karim and Irie's development. Firstly, both novels depict the characters' transition from adolescence to adulthood. Like Karim, Irie also possesses a hybrid identity. Her mother, Clara, is Jamaican, and her father, Archie, is English. Thus, both must navigate between cultures and attempt to locate where they might belong. As mentioned in 2.1, Kureishi and Smith both use the suburbs of London as a starting point for their characters. However, in the process of identity development, Irie and Karim look in opposite directions for belonging and connection. Karim's identity emerges alongside contemporary culture, and his development is future-oriented. Irie's journey, on the other hand, is less mobile and directed towards the past as she rediscovers her Jamaican heritage. Rather than tracking a progressive identity formation, *White Teeth* explores and critiques the idea of forming a cultural identity on constructed narratives of history.

The aim of this chapter is to examine how Irie Jones develops her present cultural identity by discovering a connection to the past. I suggest that Irie feels a discontentment with her present cultural identity that stems from a combination of lacking representation in contemporary society and ruptures caused by inherited transgenerational trauma. The novel depicts how unspeakable secrets are passed down from generation to generation, resulting in a sense of identity confusion and discontentment. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, several critics perceive history as a narrative constructed from different perspectives and discourses (Friedman 118, 143; Hall "Cultural Identity" 225). This idea disagrees with the notion that cultural identity must be grounded in a fundamental historical and cultural essence. Instead, it partly opens the possibility of deciding how one wishes to position oneself in relation to history. Thus, the chapter proposes that the malcontent Irie feels towards her present cultural identity results in the search for and construction of a past narrative and imagined homeland wherein she can recover a sense of continuity in her identity. The novel is both critical and supportive of the idea of constructing a past. Nevertheless, it illustrates the role of history in the forming of identities and supports the argument that hybrid identities can be rooted in the past while simultaneously developing in the present.

Irie's development primarily occurs in her titular chapter, "Irie 1990, 1907" (Smith 263), and this will be the primary object of focus. The main analysis will be divided into three sections. The two first sections identify two separate causes that I believe explain why Irie feels confused in her present cultural identity and sense of belonging. Here, I will use Bhabha

and Hall's theories of theory of cultural hybridity and identity, and theories concerning transgenerational trauma caused by colonialism. The last section focuses on how a reconnection to past and origin can create a deeper connection and understanding of Irie's cultural identity. This section will utilize the concept of postmemory and Salman Rushdie's concept of imaginary homelands to explore how Irie develops her cultural identity by constructing a historical narrative and imaginary Jamaica.

3.1 Present Tense

The basis of Karim and Irie's cultural identity is similar, as they both grow up in the liminal spaces of London's suburbs, wherein neither feels a sense of belonging. However, Irie grows up 20 years after Karim, and significant developments occurred in the suburbs between 1970 and 1990. 'City' and 'Suburbs' can no longer be understood as binary opposites of centrifugal and centripetal forces. Pope suggests that rather than drawing a definite line between the binary pair, the modern suburbs have become a rhizome of intersecting spaces that naturally transitions into the city (Pope 162). Parallel to spatial developments, the increase in migration during the latter half of the 20th century changed London's suburban demographic. Karim's Bromley was notably white and conservative, whereas the following passage demonstrates how *White Teeth's* Willesden suburbs has transformed into a heterogeneous space:

“It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball ... It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best – less trouble)” (Smith 237)

The suburban demographic development is significant when analyzing Irie and Karim's wish for escape. Karim hopes to escape the conservatism and racism of the homogenous Bromley and regards central London as a more varied space where he can locate like-minded people and develop his cultural identity. However, as the cultural and social differences between suburbs and cities decrease, the latter can no longer offer any visionary culture or sense of belonging to Irie. Willesden, with its intersecting and absurd family relations, and Central London's eccentric art scene, can both be described as spaces of “benign chaos ... a site of farce [and] experimentation” where “nothing quite works out the way it is expected to” (Pope 171). Karim is satisfied with exploring and understanding London's chaotic culture and

population because it opposes Bromley's stifling sameness. On the other hand, Irie has spent her entire life in the proximity of constant chaos and a multitude of cultures without ever locating a clear sense of belonging or understanding of her cultural identity. Consequently, Irie's journey is divergent from Karim's. Rather than molding her identity from the cultural components of her heterogeneous surroundings, she explores the historical past in search of a coherent Jamaican identity defined by sameness and continuity.

The title of the first subchapter of "Irie 1990, 1907", "The Miseducation of Irie Jones" (Smith 265), suggests that aspects of Irie's upbringing have gone amiss. We quickly discover that a lack of representation in contemporary society has left Irie with a dysmorphic image of herself and a lost sense of belonging. Despite her upbringing in a more diverse neighborhood than Bromley, there exists a dissonance between Irie's sense of self and the Eurocentric representation she is subjected to in contemporary society. As a result, Irie suffers from a persistent belief that her body is defined by wrongness and perceived as ugly. She wishes nothing more than to assimilate into the physicality of an "*English Rose* ... a slender delicate thing not made for the hot sun, a surfboard rippled by the wave" (267), yet Irie is haunted by *White Teeth*'s reoccurring motif of inescapable, genetic fate. She inherited her grandmother's Jamaican frame of "pineapples, guavas and mangoes" (265), illustrating that completely severing the ties to one's heritage becomes nearly impossible as it manifests itself physically in the body through inherited genetics.

Smith utilizes a sonnet from Shakespeare's *Dark Lady Sequence* to demonstrate the importance of representation in the shaping of cultural identities. The sonnet defends a lover who does not meet conventional beauty standards by having dark bodily features. As Irie reads the poem, she briefly glimpses a reflection of her own image in the history of England. She interprets the lady's blackness as a signifier for a person of African descent, with darker skin color and kinky hair like "black wires" (Smith 272). Irie asks her teacher, Mrs. Roody, if the Dark Lady is black, to which her teacher responds: "No dear, she's *dark*. She's not black in the modern sense. There weren't any ... Afro-carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear. That's more of a modern phenomenon" (272). Her teacher believes that the Dark Lady is white yet with a dark complexion and that the sonnet debates makeup trends in Shakespeare's time. She bases her interpretation on the belief that no people of color existed in Britain during the 1500s. If they did, she could only imagine them as enslaved people inherently undeserving of love poems and sonnets (272).

In "Cultural Identities in Diaspora", Hall argues that traumatic experiences of

colonialism affect the development of present cultural identities. He refers to Foucault's argument that "every regime of representation is a regime of power formed ... by the fatal couplet 'power/knowledge'" (Hall, "Cultural Identities" 225-226). When people or nations are subjected to colonialism, they are positioned as an Other in terms of representation through binaries, such as white in opposition to black. Through continuous domination, the colonizer implements this idea of otherness within the colonial subject as a form of knowledge, as an objective truth based on factuality. Over time, the colonial subject will internalize the idea of otherness, which will prevail in modern times. Thus, the colonizers and the western world can maintain their power through the dominant knowledge they have constructed.

As a black girl in a predominantly white classroom with a white teacher, Irie is automatically subjected to the dominant regime of white representation, and her identity is defined in terms of difference. Despite being of native English ethnicity, her "Jamaican frame" alienates her from the whiteness that English society perceives as inherent in an English identity. However, Irie's interpretation of the sonnet opens the possibility of creating a sense of belonging and connection to her English past. It suggests that not only have women of color lived in England for centuries, but they have also been valued for their appearance. For a brief second, Irie opposes the dominant discourse of white representation as propagated by her teacher. Still, Mrs. Roody's interpretation and comment quickly disparage Irie's opposition. By ridiculing her analysis, the teacher reinstates the discourse by stating her racist ideas on black people in Tudor England as indisputable and historical truth. As a young and insecure girl, Irie internalizes this knowledge yet again: "[Irie] had though just then, that she had seen something like a reflection, but it was receding ... [it] slunk back into the familiar darkness" (Smith 272). She attempts to locate an image of herself in history, yet her teacher erases the possibility of Irie's historical belonging to England and subsequently shapes and defines her cultural identity by removing her possible existence in the past. Irie's swift declination illustrates how colonial discourses have become severely internalized and how difficult it is to overcome western ideas and Eurocentric ideals. Thus, the ruptures of colonialism influence cultural identities even today; Irie believes that she is fundamentally *different* from her white classmates and that this difference is grounded in a fixed essence of English history.

Furthermore, Mrs. Roody and Irie's different interpretations can be read in the light of Bhabha's critique of how western societies value culture and cultural identities based on an authenticated past kept alive through disciplinary practices of writing and other cultural

traditions (Bhabha 54). Mrs. Roody bases her argument on the notion that there were no black people in England in the Elizabethan era by defining people of color as a “modern phenomenon” (Smith 271). This statement is factually untrue, as Britain’s first black community dates to the late 1500s (Sherwood 40). Still, historical literature has largely been produced, interpreted and disseminated by European men of white ethnicity. Consequently, Mrs. Roody demonstrates and affirms Bhabha’s criticism of how the western world bases the authenticity and value of cultures and nations on their preserved cultural artifacts and writing (Bhabha 54). Irie, then, also destabilizes the idea of a purely white English history by using her own experience and body as a reference in her analysis: “I just thought ... like when she says, here: *Then I swear, beauty herself is black ... And the curly hair thing, black wires --*” (Smith 272). The use of her own hair as an argument also supports Bhabha’s statement that “hierarchal claims to the inherent ... ‘purity’ of cultures are uneatable” (55), especially when these claims are based on historical works that may “demonstrates [cultures] hybridity” (55), which the sonnet does. Irie’s analysis demonstrates that Mrs. Roody’s notion of purity within English culture and history has no pristine unity or fixity.

The opposing analyses of Irie and her teacher additionally show how Irie’s hybrid identity places her in an in-between position. Her experience of existing between cultures and ethnicities, combined with a search for mirror images in literature, enables her to imagine a broader interpretation than her teacher. For a brief second, one could say that Irie exists in the third space of enunciation, wherein her Jamaican and English perspectives come together and discover the poems true meaning. Still, this is a fleeting moment, and I argue that the complicated relationship with her hybridity positions her in an unevenly balanced space. Her cultural identity is positioned in-between binaries of past and present and belonging and not belonging. However, the interaction between Mrs. Roody and Irie illustrates that these binaries are always unevenly in play and that her identity is continuously being shaped by history, power and cultures. Just because Irie briefly discovers a coveted representation of her own body in a historical piece of literature, it does not secure her sense of self or allow her hybridity to transcend. This is also supported by Hall, who argues that cultural identity will not be secured and finalized simply by performing an archeological recovery of the past (Hall, “Cultural Identities” 225). When she is reprimanded by her teacher, an act that reinstates the assertion of power over Irie, her sense of self immediately retracts into well-known insecurity.

Mrs. Roody’s denunciation of the interpretation contributes to the miseducation of Irie and reinforces her belief in an inherent wrongness. The severity of this recent miseducation becomes clear when Irie, following the English lesson, goes to a hairdresser to straighten her

hair. She becomes “intent upon fighting her own genes” (Smith 273), and Hamann-Rose interprets it as a rebellion against two critical aspects of her cultural identity: race and family (17). Still, I suggest that it additionally can be read as a symptom of cultural alienation. There is a clear connection between the dismissal of Irie’s hope that the black lady, like her, has kinky and wiry hair and her request at the hairdresser for “straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakeable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair” (273). Having been removed from the narrative of English history by her teacher, Irie performs one last attempt at assimilation into the culture by altering the most visible parts of her difference, namely her appearance. However, a central motif in the novel is how genetics and heritage are inescapable components that shape our cultural identities beyond our control. Straightening afro-textured hair is done by using ammonia, which in the novels is depicted as a painful and potentially damaging process if not done right. Irie’s desperation leads her to perform the process too hastily; her scalp is too clean, and the ammonia burns the hair off her head. I agree with Hamann-Rose that the attempt to acquire sleek hair can be read as a rebellion, yet the catastrophic result signifies that this rebellion, in the end, partly will remain fruitless. As we will see later, Irie can rebel against her family, yet her ethnicity is a physical part of her she cannot escape. For Irie to become more secure in her cultural identity, she ultimately must accept her Jamaican heritage. Still, the lacking representatives of Irie’s physicality in society and the visible history makes this a complicated process.

3.2 Past Tense

Although Irie’s sense of not belonging and discontinued sense of self partly stem from a lack of representation in past and contemporary history, it also lies in inherited transgenerational traumas caused by colonialism in Jamaica. I will now examine how unresolved and unspoken events in the Bowden heritage shape present cultural identities.

As mentioned in the introduction, the temporality of *The Buddha* and *White Teeth* differs. The former has a linear temporality which enhances the forwardness of Karim’s identity development. In contrast, the non-linear structure of *White Teeth* reflects the motif of how history, and specifically unspeakable and traumatic history, impacts lives in the present. The novel repeatedly utilizes ellipsis and fragmented memories to examine how past traumatic experiences turn into transgenerational traumas. The non-linearity further implies that the different families of *White Teeth* have not worked through their traumas in a normative conception of recovery. Thus, the younger generation ricochets between the past

and the present in their attempt to stitch up a coherent narrative of their historical past. In Irie's case, there is a lack of explanation and conversation about the colonial traumatic experiences of her great-grandmother and grandmother that result in the sense of incompleteness and confusion regarding her cultural identity and sense of belonging. Before continuing, I will briefly explain the concept of transgenerational trauma.

Firstly, Ridhuan et al. define transgenerational trauma, or transgenerational transmission of trauma, as "the transmission of the effect of an experience of trauma from an individual or group of individuals in one generation to an individual(s) in later generations" (527). Secondly, Trauma studies have been criticized for remaining "within a Euro American conceptual and historical framework" (Rothberg 225). The field has primarily been concerned with generational traumas following the holocaust of the Second World War, and the theory of holocaust trauma has been applied to the study of colonial and postcolonial traumas. In response to the lacking perspective on generational traumas outside the western world, a decolonization of the field has occurred in recent years (225). This has resulted in a more thorough theorization of how colonialism affects the individual and the trauma connected to postcolonial migration and the existence in diaspora. The psychological consequences of being subjected to colonialism are commonly connected to Frantz Fanon's book *White Skin, Black Mask* (1952), wherein Fanon examines how the colonial subject internalizes oppression and racist beliefs through objectification and processes of othering.

However, recent studies tend to focus on the shift from individual psychology to collective trauma. Postcolonial trauma studies examine how colonial traumas become collective as they extend into contemporary time, rather than being delimited to a specific historical event (Visser 9). The trauma becomes unspeakable memories passed on from generation to generation, yet it also includes diasporic experiences of racism and othering, as experienced by Karim and Irie. The conception that trauma is unspeakable is common, and Lyotard points out that "there is a pressing need to articulate trauma, [but] it is often impossible to do so" (qtd. in Ward 177). In *White Teeth*, Smith articulates the erupting issue of unspeakable trauma due to colonialism, defining it as "something one repeats and repeats ... [immigrants] can't help but re-enact the dash they once made from one land to another, from one faith to another" (Smith 457-458). Thus, the lack of communication between the different family members in the novel leads to a circular repetition of traumatic mistakes. This further prevents the development of a coherent sense of identity for several of the characters. As Ulrike Tancke argues, the "alignment of self and history is central to contemporary

theories of identity” (Tancke 2). When the past is a shattered or hidden narrative nobody will talk about, it becomes nearly impossible to develop a coherent identity in a diaspora.

The original trauma of the Bowden women is detailed in the chapter “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden” (Smith 356). In the early 1900s, Irie’s great-grandmother Ambrosia Bowden was raped by the British colonial captain Charlie Durham, resulting in the birth of Irie’s grandmother Hortense. Their relationship is compared to a colonial transaction; Durham loves Ambrosia “like the English loved India” (Smith 361), and he wishes to educate her as a part of the civilizing mission of colonialism. The traumatic relationship and sexual assault are described as a “family memory” and an “unforgettable trace of bad blood” (356), hence creating the impression of it being a conscious memory within the family. However, the memory is hidden within the Bowden women like a Russian doll. To truly unearth and understand it, one would have to “put [The Bowden women] all back together ... Irie back in Clara, Clare back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia” (356). The imagery of the women as one unit is also emphasized by Smith’s commentary on Jamaican grammar and pronouns: “In Jamaica ... there is no choice of personal pronouns, no splits between me or you or they, there is only the pure, homogenous I” (327). Consequently, there exists continuous unity between the generations, yet the shame and distress of their past have prevented direct communication and understanding of their seemingly inescapable familiar connection. The transgenerational trauma passed on to Clara and Irie is a severe rupture that, unknowingly to them, shapes their present identities and fractures their relationships. When Clara marries a white man, Hortense, remembering her own white father, severs the ties to her daughter without seemingly ever explaining the reason behind her separation. What prevails for Clara is silent confusion regarding their heritage, identities, and belonging, which she unavoidably passes on to Irie.

Consequently, secrecy becomes a trauma in and of itself that prevents a coherent development. Aversion to talk about the past further harms the relationship between Irie and Clara, demonstrating the repeating of mistakes. Clara lost and removed her remaining teeth at a young age yet never told her daughter. Irie discovers the truth when she at night knocks Clara’s dentures off the nightstand and is bitten. Teeth are a recurring motif in the novel, and the pulling of teeth is compared to the revelation of secrets: “These are old secrets. They will come out like wisdom teeth when the time is right” (Smith 306). Hence, the revelation of lost teeth and secrets also functions as a catalyst in Irie’s exploration of her past and identity, and the exposure of Clara’s secret toothlessness results in a final epiphany for Irie: “these parents were damaged people, missing hand, missing teeth ... full of information you wanted to know

but were too scared to hear” (379). Irie ultimately realizes that her parents’ silence prevents her identity formation. Like Karim, this means that the development must happen outside the confines of her childhood home. If Irie is to understand and recover her past, she must actively search it out herself.

3.3 Past Perfect

White Teeth’s continuous focus on how the past influence the present additionally include an examination of how we construct and rewrite our own narrative of the past. This motif can be seen in relation to Friedman and Hall’s view that every retelling of history, in some way, is a narrative told from a certain perspective (Friedman 143; Hall “Cultural Identity” 225). The idea that history is a narrative that positions subjects in contemporary times is relevant for Irie’s perception of her heritage and the formation of her cultural identity, especially her Jamaican identity. Irie primarily stitches up her own historical narrative by discovering historical pictures and literature from Jamaica. The novel utilizes and critiques Salman Rushdie’s concept of imaginary homelands to describe Irie’s process of rediscovering her past and creating a sense of belonging and identity. The concept of imaginary homelands can further be connected to Marianne Hirsch’s theory on postmemory. Hirsch and Rushdie examine how artifacts and stories transmit memories, either imagined or lived by others. This section will utilize the two theories when analyzing Irie’s attempts to shape her cultural identity based on the reconstruction of her Jamaican past.

Irie’s journey is first and foremost an imagined relocation in space and time as she rediscovers and recreates the Jamaica of her mind. Nonetheless, she also performs a physical journey by evacuating from the emotionally stagnated home of her parents in Willesden and moving in with her grandmother, Hortense, in the Lambeth suburbs. Matthew Paproth proposes that Irie’s rebellion signifies a wish to “prune” away at her historical roots (16). However, I argue that her spatial relocation disproves this argument as Irie’s journey leads her further into her family and past: “[She] knew where she had to go, deep into the heart of it” (Smith 379). Her relocation to her grandmother additionally creates a sense of literal regression into the past, as Hortense’s house has remained the same since Clara left it some 20 years ago. Irie’s construction of her Jamaican heritage is primarily founded on the discovery of several forgotten or hidden artifacts in Hortense’s basement. The basement is compared to a cocoon from which Irie eventually will emerge as a transformed individual. The image of a physical transformation parallels *The Buddha*’s structure of the

bildungsroman. However, Karim and Irie's development differs in their visibility. Karim's evolution is observable to the people surrounding him, as he primarily develops through social interactions or as an actor on a stage. The metamorphosis of Irie, on the other hand, happens alone in the darkness of cupboards and neglected drawers containing forgotten secrets (Smith 399).

Irie's use of historical objects in her construction of a past can be read in the light of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which is a theory of transgenerational trauma. Hirsch proposes that collective traumatic experiences of past generations are transmitted to the following generations. The remembering can happen orally through recounted narratives and stories, yet it can also be transmitted through historical artifacts, pictures and behaviors (Hirsch 106). Hirsch focuses on photography as a central medium for the transference of memories between generations. The iconic and symbolic power of photos offers access to an event that previously would have been unimaginable. They become ghostly fragments of an irretrievable place, retaining a symbolic status that forms our understanding of past events and traumas. Therefore, photography can consolidate the longing and desire of later generations and confirm their constructed narratives of the past (115-116). As with postcolonialism, the 'post' in postmemory does not indicate a finished process nor a "temporal delay" (106). On the contrary, postcolonialism and postmemory are both ongoing processes. They shape the present, yet to understand the processes of these concepts, one must look back to the origin of the trauma.

The significance of photographic representation of heritage is present in contrast between the Jones/Bowdens and the Chalfen family. The Chalfens represent an extreme form of normativity and unity, which they have dubbed Chalfenism, a mannerism "handed down the family for generations" (Smith 312). Their coherency is physically visible in a framed family tree on their wall, symbolizing a continuity as every Chalfen "knew whose children were whose" (338). Their visual ancestry enhances Irie's longing for sameness. Upon discovering photographs of Clara, Ambrosia, and Charlie Durham, she immediately utilizes them to establish an idea of her Jamaican past. Still, the idea of postmemory becomes problematic when the memories are passed down unsupervised. Irie is desperate for a sense of belonging to Jamaica and knowledge of her own ancestry. Subsequently, she builds on the wreckage of her family to romanticize a Jamaican past that, in reality, was severely traumatic for the people involved. Although Hirsch is primarily positive about the possibility of photography as a transmitter for postmemory, she acknowledges that images may attain a symbolic status too quickly and too easily. Building on a limited number of two-dimensional

pictures results in a fragmented understanding of an event, which opens for a more extensive “narrative elaboration” (Hirsch 116-117). Irie perceives her great-grandfather Durham as a heroic figure: “handsome and melancholy” who is “looking worldly-wise despite his youth ... like he could tell someone or another a thing or two about something” (Smith 400). Irie’s idea of her great-grandfather contrasts with a previous chapter wherein Clara concludes that every Bowden woman is smarter than Durham, whom *she* describes as a “no-good djam fool bwoy” (356). Thus, the photography transmits a memory, yet the lack of communication between generations results in a fallacious perception of Irie’s ancestry.

Salman Rushdie also begins his personal essay “Imaginary Homelands” (1991) with contemplation on how a photograph of a house in Bombay promises a safe belonging to the past (Rushdie 9). Like Hirsch, Rushdie observes how fragmented memories, such as a picture of a house, obtain a symbolic status in the envision of the past. The essay suggests that a loss of significant memories occurs when one lives in diaspora and is permanently displaced from a place of origin. The lost ability to correctly remember a place begets an urge for retrospection and reclaiming of past places. Displaced people, therefore, eventually begin to imagine and fabricate a place that does not exist; an imaginary homeland, or “India’s of the mind” (10). Furthermore, the essay suggests that the memory loss of a homeland combined with a prolonged existence in a different cultural space can lead to a discontinuous sense of identity. Living in diaspora often entails a “plural and partial identity” (16). The split can enable a double perception and understanding of several cultures. However, it can also result in the sensation of “fall[ing] between two stools” which prevents any sense of belonging or connection to either cultures.

White Teeth actively uses the term ‘imaginary homeland’ to describe Irie’s idea of Jamaica. Playing on the lexical meaning of the name, Irie imagines Jamaica to be a well-wooded and watered place. In addition to photos, she discovers Hortense’s “small and eclectic library” (Smith 399). Yet, Irie seemingly fails to consider that the library primarily consists of books written by English colonial authors; *In Sugar Land* by Eden Phillpotts and *Dominica: Hints and Notes to Intending Settlers* by His Honour H. Hesketh Bell (399-400). The books craft an image of Jamaica from an English colonialist perspective. Consequently, Irie’s imagined homeland uncritically becomes a place characterized by colonial products: “it was sugar, sugar, sugar, and next door was nothing but tobacco” (400).

In “The Rainbow Sign” Kureishi reflects on how life in diaspora can ignite the hopeful belief of an eventual return to a homeland. He is critical of this notion, as he suggests that the people who inhabit this hope imagine that the return will result in a final and

contented state of belonging. On the contrary, once the subject returns to their place of origin, they will ultimately realize that England and English culture have profoundly influenced and molded their identities. Therefore, the journey will end in disappointment and unhappiness (19). *White Teeth* partly supports this argument, as the narrator indirectly criticizes Irie's ignorance of Jamaica's history and its indigenous people: "the arawaks stubbornly re-named [it] Xaymaca ... Not that Irie had heard of those little sweet-tempered pot-bellied victims" (Smith 400). The Arawaks, an indigenous people of the Caribbean, are characterized as "some *other* Jamaicans" (400) whom neither Irie nor the narrative of English history could fit into their attention span. Irie sincerely wishes to belong to Jamaica, yet in her attempts to do so, she colonizes the country in her mind by viewing the Caribbean as an object she can rightfully and mindfully claim: "This all *belonged* to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings" (400). The absence of knowledge of colonial violence illustrates how her identity is deeply rooted and shaped by English culture and narratives. Instead, she romanticizes both the past and her imagined Jamaica by believing it to be a place "where a young white captain could meet a young black girl with no complication" (402). From Irie's point of view, the past and her imagined homeland are uncomplicated and free of myths and lies. Thus, the novel demonstrates ambivalence and ridicules the concept of imagined homelands by comparing it to made-up objects such as unicorns and souls.

Nonetheless, in the light of Stuart Hall's essay "Negotiating Caribbean Identities" (1995), Irie's projection of an imagined Jamaica serves a purpose for her cultural identity. Hall asserts that the traditional western perception of cultural identity is that it must be grounded in a fundamental and historical essence to which we can return. This view poses a problem for Caribbean identities, as the search for a fundamental origin is seemingly impossible due to the ruptures and displacement caused by colonialism (Hall, "Negotiating" 4). Instead of searching for an essential origin, cultural identity should be thought of as a narrative we tell ourselves of who and what we are. Hall asserts that the process of producing an identity is "always a question of producing in the future an account of the past" ("Negotiating" 8). Irie's dissatisfaction with her own cultural identity and sense of self motivates her to actively seek out a cultural identity and create a narrative for herself. She enters Hortense's cocoon of a basement with the hopes of reappearing with a clearer sense of her cultural identity: "she was as curious as everyone else to see what kind of Irie would emerge" (Smith 399). Irie utilizes the recovered fragments of her past and locates significant points in history wherein she can find a sense of belonging.

For Irie, as a hybrid individual existing in-between Caribbean and English culture,

positioning herself in a specific cultural identity can lead to confusion. Instead, the positioning becomes a question of representation, of where she can locate “in the mirror of history a point of identification or recognition for yourself” (Hall, “Negotiating” 8). Irie has attempted to find a point of recognition in English history through a reading of Shakespeare. Nevertheless, she is continuously positioned outside of history by other people, and in this case her teacher. Karim’s final realization of his inevitable in-between state of belonging and not belonging in England, as discussed in 2.2, also illustrates a certain degree of continuous alienation from Englishness due to their hybridity. It is impossible for Karim and Irie to entirely belong to the prevailing idea of a white English culture. Additionally, Hall also refers to Fanon’s *White Skin, Black Mask* to support his argument that colonialism has ruptured the identification process in the Caribbean too. He claims that a lingering identity in the Caribbean is the subjects’ internalized identity as an Other (“Negotiating 8). In the light of these views, Irie’s romanticization of Jamaica in the identification process may seem like the only option to reach a contented sense of cultural identity. It allows her to imagine a place where she can exist in her Jamaican identity without being perceived as an Other.

Although her reconstruction of the past is done unsupervised, and Irie creates her own narrative, it can be read as an attempt to mend her heritage’s transgenerational trauma. This is accentuated by Irie’s career choice, which turns out to be dentistry. Barbara Schaff sees this career path as symbolic of the growth of Irie’s cultural identity (Schaff 284), as she will remove and mend the wounds caused by rotten teeth and secrets. Just as she has confronted and filled the metaphorical root canals of the novel, she will now do the same with actual teeth. *White Teeth* is less clear than *The Buddha* in its conclusion. Still, the following passage hints that Irie, at the very least, accepts and acknowledges the hidden trauma of her family: “In a vision, Irie has seen a time, a time not far from now, when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because ... they’re just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it” (Smith 257). By accepting the past, she also realizes that not being rooted to the trauma opens the possibility for forwarding her development. The last we hear of Irie is in a “snapshot seven years hence” (541), wherein Irie and Hortense are “sitting by the Caribbean sea” (541). Albeit a brief glimpse, it signifies an ending and a beginning; they have traveled back to the site of trauma and can create a new meaning and memories from this place. Lastly, it opens for further development of Irie’s cultural identity as she no longer must imagine her homeland. Rather, she can continue to develop her identity in a space of representation in terms of her physicality and through a sense of historical connection.

3.4 Chapter Conclusion

White Teeth offers an examination of how history and heritage affect the process of cultural identity. Through the character of Irie Jones, the novel accentuates how cultural identification becomes a painful and confusing process due to lacking or ruptured representations and unspeakable histories, both in the past and in contemporary times. The missing representation of people like Irie in written English history and modern culture results in a skewed perception of herself, both physically and mentally. It becomes a constant search for an image, a point of representation wherein she can attempt to discover a sense of sameness and continuation in her cultural identity.

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Hall writes that Caribbean cultural identities can be placed in-between two vectors: “the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture” (226), and I suggest that this chapter has shown that Irie, too, can be positioned similarly. The ruptures caused by the transgenerational trauma have, knowingly and unknowingly, affected her entire identity thus far. Additionally, the othering she is subjected to as a girl of Jamaican ethnicity in England becomes a rupture in the process of shaping her cultural identity. It alienates her from the whiteness of English history, as seen with Mrs. Roody’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s sonnet. These are critical points of difference that illustrate that her identity does not simply begin at a fixed origin that proceeds forward in a straight and balanced line. Instead, like Karim, Irie is and always will be influenced by powers and other cultures.

However, locating a sameness and continuity that can partly balance the discontinuity becomes critical for Irie. It offers a sense of coherency amidst the confusion caused by traumatic experiences and displacement. Although the novel at times criticizes and ridicules her imagined Jamaica, the rediscovery reveals fragments of hidden and silenced histories she has wondered about but never dared to ask. Hall writes that images, such as Irie’s idea of Jamaica, “restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude to set against the broken rubric of our past” (“Cultural Identity” 225). Despite the problematic aspects concerning the romanticization of her colonial great-grandfather, it also becomes a form of re-telling and healing that ultimately allows the Bowden women to move on. For Irie, this entails both a spatial movement to Jamaica and the possibility to continue the development of her cultural identity with a more secure sense of herself and her history.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to examine cultural and hybrid identity in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth*, with an emphasis on how the development of identity can be understood as a continuous process that never reaches completion. I have suggested that Kureishi and Smith trace two different ways of forming one's identity; Karim Amir looks to the future in hopes of locating a sense of belonging and developing his cultural identity alongside contemporary culture and history. In comparison, Irie Jones turns to her Jamaican past and an imagined homeland with the hope of locating a continuation in her cultural identity and feeling of sameness that modern England cannot offer her. Still, their cultural identities are affected and influenced in a similar manner, as they are positioned in-between cultures and binary pairs of belonging and not belonging, cultural sameness and difference, and rupture and continuation. Their mixed ethnicities, that of English and Indian or Jamaican, position them as hybrid subjects in England and, more precisely, London and London's suburbs. Their hybridity entails negotiation and navigating different cultures and ideas of belonging in a nation that struggles to move away from its imperial past. As this thesis has shown, this navigation becomes a complex and frequently painful process due to the lingering effect of colonial discourses and outdated ideas of pure and fixed cultures and cultural identity.

By utilizing Stuart Hall's theory on cultural identity, I have identified similar points of rupture and difference in Karim and Irie's identity process. Although they search for their cultural identity in opposite temporal directions, neither can avoid instances of abuse and acts of othering in the present. Smith and Kureishi both utilize the suburbs of London, and the suburban population, to demonstrate outdated ideas of culture that ultimately alienate people of non-white ethnicity. Karim's conflict with Hairy Back, albeit more forthright, partly parallels Irie's and Mrs. Roody's conflicting analysis of Shakespeare. These instances illustrate how Karim and Irie as hybrid subjects inhabit a liminal space wherein they are positioned as the other in a dominant regime of white representation. Hairy Back and Mrs. Roody's perception of Englishness, identity, and history relies on ideas grounded in a binary-structured colonial discourse, which views Karim and Irie as an Other. In the formation of cultural identity, the othering alienates Karim and Irie from aspects of their English history and the spaces they live and grow in. However, it forces the two of them to take an active choice in how they wish to continue shaping their identities and forms the basis for their

subsequent development. For Karim, Hairy Back signifies a stagnated culture and outdated ways of creating an identity based on notions of purity. It becomes an indicator of the direction Karim wants his identity to develop, which is towards the future. Irie is less certain about the development of her identity, and struggles with her sense of not belonging. Nonetheless, her estrangement forces her to discover different spaces and points in history where she can locate a reflection of herself and stronger sense of connection to her heritage.

Continuity and sameness are also significant aspects in the process of forming a cultural identity, and the major difference between Karim and Irie lies in their longing for sameness. Neither of them has much knowledge of their non-English ethnicities at the beginning of the novels, nor do they feel any sameness within the present English identity. It is from this point that their journeys go in opposing directions. Sameness and continuation can offer people, especially displaced people, a sense of coherency and stable frames of meaning. The need for sameness is most present in Irie as she turns to the past, searching for knowledge that can secure her sense of self. It offers her and her family closure to traumatic events and ruptures caused by colonialism and enables them to move forward. In comparison, Karim is less inclined to locate his cultural identity in his heritage or history. The wish to experience and emerge side by side with modern cultures entails an unavoidable split from the past. His spatial journey enhances the active choice of removing himself from what he has inherited. Nonetheless, they both end up with their families in a place they have longed for and eventually feel a sense of connection to; Karim in Central London with his family and friends, and Irie in Jamaica with her grandmother. These endings illustrate that, to some degree, a sense of rootedness and sameness is necessary for the formation of cultural identities.

Karim and Irie's hybridity destabilizes fixed ideas of culture and history, ultimately showing that identity is not grounded in any pure or fixed essence. Still, the fluctuation in the shaping of their cultural identities shows us how Karim and Irie's hybridity never transcends binary structures but is instead influenced by them in an uneven manner. Although they are positioned in-between different cultures and binary pairs such as belonging and not belonging, difference and sameness, and rupture and continuity, they never move beyond or out of reach of these binaries. There are instances, such as Irie's reading of Shakespeare's sonnet, that support the notion of a third space wherein one can locate the true meaning of culture. Still, these are brief occasions of sameness that are continually interrupted by the play of difference. In *White Teeth*, Smith comments on the idea of a neutral space: "The chance of finding [a neutral space] these days are slim ... the sheer *quantity* of shit that must be wiped

off the slate ... Race. Land. Ownership. Faith. Theft. Blood” (Smith 457). The idea that there exist no neutral spaces illustrates how power and history are inescapable factors that shape us, for better or worse. However, it is the play between binary pairs, the sameness and difference in their culture and heritage, that ultimately makes up the process of forming their cultural identities.

Karim and Irie’s transition from adolescence to adulthood happens 20 years apart, and in significantly different neighborhoods in terms of homogenous and heterogeneous cultures and populations, yet they still share similar experiences and must navigate their identities in a similar manner. History is constantly being made, shaped, and constructed, and influences us in the present and the future. Hence, as history and culture never reach a finalized state or ending, neither will cultural and hybrid identities

Finally, I wish to propose two suggestions for further research on this topic. Firstly, although it was briefly touched upon in chapter two, a perspective to examine more closely in the two novels is the relation between class and race and how they intertwine and affect the characters. An examination of these motifs could also lead to a broader perspective on different aspects of English society, culture and history. Secondly, this thesis has explored two novels that focus on identity development and English history and culture in the mid-to-late 20th century. Since then, there has been an increase in discourses and debates on systemic racism and discrimination, both in Britain and on a global stage. Simultaneously, we are also witnessing a growth in right-wing extremism that supports political ideologies of purity in race and nationalism, which opposes ideas of fluid and hybrid identity. Lastly, as mentioned in the introduction, more and more people are migrating and relocating across borders for different reasons, and cultures are become ever more intertwined and hybrid. Thus, it would be interesting to examine more recent literature that depicts the development and processes of cultural hybridity and identity in Britain today, and if and how they are affected by these political situations.

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