Beyond the Post-Colonial: Comic Effects in British Migrant Fiction

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Table of Contents

I Introduction

As the term 'postcolonialism' changed from its original meaning, from an historical period (used to avoid the misleading 'colonial', 'independence', 'post-independence' chronology) it took on various cultural and political significances, most of which are concerned with the continuing effects of Western imperialism on Others, and with cultural resistance to those who hold power in the West. As the term has become fashionable it has been applied to all 'minority' struggles against a dominant order, and even to all post-invasion periods of history. It is not uncommon to hear of classical or medieval postcolonial studies. Like most once cutting edge ideas that have been around too long, 'postcolonialism' has become a cliché, a 'received idea' enshrined in the cultural vocabulary. It is unlikely that any student of literature can avoid some version of 'postcolonialism' or 'postcolonial resistance theory'… . [However], literature often seems to be written against such simple-think.

- Bruce King[1]

What does it mean when a paradigm has been 'around too long'? How does that affect the dynamics of its development? What implications does it have for the relationship between an established critical approach and its object of inquiry, literature?

In the above epigraph, Bruce King claims that post-colonialism today represents one such outdated paradigm. King expresses his critique of the status quo of the post-colonial discourse by arguing that the rise of post-colonialism as a critical theory has over time lead to its unchallenged establishment in the academic arena. Once a political novelty and a revolutionary approach to literary fiction, it has become a familiar set of critical tools or, as King suggests, an unquestioned template for analysis and interpretation of literary texts. King points to the consequences of what he calls post-colonial 'simple-think': parameters of post-colonial theory are too easily applied to literary fiction regardless of its context, history or agenda. This approach seems particularly problematic in the light of new emerging fictions that are reaching for new horizons beyond traditional post-colonial idea(l)s.

King's critique of post-colonial theory as an outdated yet conventional perspective in literary criticism represents a starting point for my analysis. I agree with King's objection that the over-hasty application of post-colonial concepts and questions in British literature of the last two decades has been a common practice that has eventually resulted in limited and narrow readings of contemporary texts. What is more, post-colonial criticism has been imposed upon works of fiction that

[1] Bruce King, "Abdulrazak Gurnah and Hanif Kureishi: Failed Revolutions," *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. James Acheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005) 85.

rather propose a *critique* of post-colonial parameters and suggest alternative views and agendas. One such body of literary fiction is what in the following I will refer to as British migrant fiction.

With this genre, contemporary British writing has entered new ground different from the hitherto known post-colonial fiction. The label ‘migrant fiction’ echoes Roy Sommer’s *Fictions of Migration* (2001), a study on current intercultural and transcultural fiction in Britain. According to Sommer, migrant fiction captures a whole range of migrant and intercultural experiences in Britain. It is a genre produced by writers of hyphenated origin, who “do not permit any kind of limitation in the choices they make in their topics nor do they accept any kind of role as representatives of a particular ethnic group” (Sommer 8, my translation). Sommer’s focus on the hyphenated authorial origin is all-encompassing: it allows for authors with South-Asian, African, but also Caribbean roots or family ties, predominantly 'born and bred' in Britain, with many in possession of UK citizenship. These authors lay claim on fresh and unique perspectives on what they believe the multicultural society in Britain to be made of. At the same time, they refrain from ambassadorship for any ethnic or minority groups. More importantly, Sommer states that the literary oeuvre of migrant fiction has abandoned the domain of the traditionally 'better-established' post-colonial writing and its typical concerns. The novels of migrant fiction are not occupied with the notorious post-colonial agenda of writing against the former imperial power and its legacy in present-day Britain. Instead, British migrant fiction thematises multicultural and transcultural experiences and responses of the first and second migrant generations to the environment they inhabit (Sommer 15).

Sommer’s genre classification provides a vantage point for my characterisation of British migrant fiction. It is a genre created by British writers with (partly) hyphenated personae and recent immigrant family histories. Their literary focus is multi-directional; the authors explore a variety of topics in their work. In doing so, they act against the public expectation to speak for ethnic or minority communities. Their concerns lie mainly in portrayals of multicultural and transcultural experiences; post-colonial conflicts play, if anything, a marginal role. In addition to Sommer’s concept, two more aspects are crucial for my perspective on this genre. Firstly, as my analysis of three representative novels will show, post-colonial concepts and ideas are explicitly negotiated in British migrant fiction. However, the relationship

between the post-colonial paradigm and the new genre is one of contrast and re-negotiation; the distinction between post-colonial writing and British migrant fiction is established via narrative strategies with which the works of migrant fiction discuss post-colonial concepts and ideas. In *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth*, it is particularly the use of comic effects with which these novels re-evaluate post-colonial parameters. Apart from that, British migrant fiction has a second ambition: to propose alternative views of what is relevant and prominent in British society. Every novel has a unique and specific agenda; yet, what they share as common ground is their detachment from post-colonial foci and their movement towards new, non-post-colonial perspectives. The genre's re-negotiation of post-colonial parameters and introduction of new world-views echoes Bruce King's critique expressed in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter. He suggests that post-colonial methods and concepts have been easily applied to narratives associated with migrant experience in Britain and this practice has resulted in post-colonial readings of novels that have removed themselves from this thematic field towards world-views that overtly oppose or transcend post-colonial ideas. As my analysis will show, British migrant fiction challenges the very post-colonial parameters with which it is approached. The novels at hand operate largely with comic impulses to achieve this literary objective.

Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000)[2] owe much of their popularity and public attention to the fact that they have been perceived and reviewed as highly entertaining. The comic effects in these novels have not gone unnoticed by the academe either; their reception, however, has been dominated by post-colonial criticism. The unfortunate consequence of this selective academic focus is a critical emphasis on merely one singular function of humour in these novels, namely a post-colonial instrument of "laughing back" (Reichl and Stein 12) against neo-colonial dominion. In their study on comic effects in post-colonial fiction, Reichl and Stein argue that humour is regarded as a strategically employed instrument of post-colonial subversion and agency: "[W]hat little work on humour exists can be subsumed under an *interventionist stance* – for postcolonial critique is concerned with theorizing engagement, with analysing agency for the marginalised and, in some

[2] When quoting from the primary sources, I will refer to *Anita and Me* as *Anita*; *The Buddha of Suburbia* will be marked as *Buddha* and *White Teeth* as *WT*.

quarters, even with *creating agency*" (2, emphasis in the original). Consequently, the majority of critical standpoints on the functions of comic effects in the novels under survey is in accordance with the assumption that humour serves as a narrative method of counter-attack against neo-colonial tendencies of the imperial centre of power.[3]

Humour, however, is a phenomenon of a more complex and intricate nature than the post-colonial paradigm allows for. To focus merely on its power to subvert is to factor in only a fraction of its capacity. Humour encompasses many aspects and functions without which a thorough examination and discussion of comic effects in British migrant fiction or any fiction would be incomplete. Also, what has been neglected in the post-colonial approach to comic impulses is the question what they are directed against on the textual level. A closer look at the targets of scorn in British migrant fiction reveals that it is to a remarkable extent post-colonial ideas, issues and standpoints that are exposed to narrative critique.[4] Instead of focusing on the subversive function of humour alone, I will pursue an eclectic approach to what comic effects can perform or communicate as impulses of textual guidance. In my view, an interdisciplinary connection between linguistic, social and philosophical elements of humour is the most fruitful approach to the capacities and functions humour can have. My analysis is therefore based upon a range of hypotheses stemming from several strings of general humour theory.

Having said this, I am aware of the barriers along the way that the analysis of the comic[5] can contain. To analyse humour is to enter a potential minefield: Erichsen points out that "[a]nalysing humour is like dissecting a frog: nobody enjoys it" (27). To begin with, it is difficult to acknowledge humour as a topic of analytical study, as any attempts to disassemble it into its single elements and mechanisms will most probably be sanctioned with irritation and discontent of the audience — anyone ever trapped in explaining a joke will confirm that. Humour is to be shared and appreciated, not to be examined as an object of inquiry. Consequently, scholars who tackle humour as a matter of their academic interest are met with bewilderment and even bias. Both the general public and members of the academe presume that an

[3] A more detailed retrospect on post-colonial readings of *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* follows in the respective chapters on these novels.

[4] In most cases, this critique of the post-colonial also reflects authorial opinion, as some statements made by Smith, Kureishi and Syal will show.

[5] By 'the comic' I mean the sum of all potentially humorous utterances, events and effects, in distinction from the term 'comic' used in relation to Graphic Novels.

investigator in humour either lacks any sense of humour in order to be analytical about it or that s/he is the life of every party and an expert in joke-telling (Powell and Paton x). Either way, these public and scholarly prejudices result in a devaluation of humour as an object of earnest study.

However, as Powell and Paton ascertain, "humour is a serious matter" (xii) that deserves proficient scholarly examination. At first sight, the primary function of humour is to amuse and to entertain. In my study, however, I will go beyond this premise and dovetail with many scholars who argue that humour serves more than mere entertainment;[6] Humour should be taken seriously, because it never is *just* entertainment. It is an intricate and multi-layered phenomenon that can express a whole range of attitudes, including such opposite poles as sympathy and dismissal of others:

> [H]umor not only is a sign of closeness among friends, it is also an effective way of forging social bonds, even in situations not very conducive to closeness: it 'breaks the ice' between strangers, unites people in different hierarchical positions, and creates a sense of shared 'conspiracy' in the context of illicit activities like gossiping or joking about superiors. The flip side of this inclusive function of humor is exclusion. Those who do not join in the laughter, because they do not get the joke, or even worse, because the joke targets them, will feel left out, shamed, or ridiculed. (Kuipers 366)

The versatility of humour and its capacity to serve as a carrier of both sympathy *and* hostility calls for inquiries that address and analyse the full range of its potential; my study represents one such endeavour.[7]

With humour as the subject of my concern, the question of definition immediately arises: what is humour? How can one formulate one single explanation for an idea that apparently contains so many facets? Perhaps the easiest approach to the categorisation of humour is to first distinguish it from other concepts and clarify what it is *not*. Laughter is predominantly considered connatural to humour. Critics, however, emphasise the importance of separating humour and laughter as two different terms. In general, laughter is considered one possible bodily reaction to humorous remarks, jokes or events. In his study on humour, Morreall delivers a pictographic description of laughter as an "involuntary or semi-voluntary [body]

[6] Lewis (1989); Martin et al. (2003); Kuipers (2008); Ermida (2008).

[7] I acknowledge the work of scholars such as Paul Lewis (1988), András Horn (1988) and Dieter Berger (2008) whose methods and hypotheses on humour in literature have been useful for my undertaking.

response to a stimulus" (Introduction 4). He also points out that laughter can be caused by physical stimuli such as tickling, thus concluding that humour is not the only initiating impulse that causes laughter (Introduction 4). Chapman and Foot are in accord with Morreall by stating that laughter as a physical reaction of the body, "is just as much a response to non-humorous stimuli as it is to humour stimuli" (3). Hence the correlation between humour as a stimulus and laughter as response is not imperative. I will nonetheless acknowledge laughter in my understanding of humour *not* as a synonym for humour but, as Ermida puts it, as "the *intended* perlocutionary effect of the humorous message" (39, emphasis in the original). In addition to laughter, amusement, joy or mirth equally are possible consequences of the humorous momentum provoked within the reader by the comic potential in a text.

The fact that humour is often used interchangeably with other terms such as laughter adds to the ambiguity of this concept that does not allow for easy definitions. Virtually hundreds of years of scholarly debate have merely resulted in a consensus on its evasiveness and double-entendre. Humour in all its facets can hardly be narrowed down to one simple and overarching definition; critics, however, have ventured on more complex definitions that cover the versatility of humour. Chapman and Foot offer one possible answer:

> One obvious problem that bedevils definitions of humour is whether it is to be viewed as a stimulus, a response or a disposition. *The Penguin English Dictionary* allows all three possibilities: humour may refer to that which causes 'good-tempered laughter' (stimulus); or 'cheerful and good-tempered amusement' (response); or 'the capacity for seeing the funny side of things' (disposition). (Chapman and Foot 3, emphasis in the original)

It becomes evident that humour is an umbrella term that comprises three different perspectives: a subject or an individual with a disposition to see and point out "the funny side of things", a set of strategies that generate humorous potential and, the ability and readiness to respond to this strategic stimulus which usually resolves in laughter or amusement on the part of the recipient. Horn follows suit by listing three elements required for a successful communication of humour: it takes a 'subject' of humour or an individual with a skill to tell a joke or make a humorous remark, furthermore a target of humour or an object ridiculous enough to draw onto itself humorous attention, and, the 'recipient' of humour, an individual or an audience that is supposed to get the joke (Horn 19).

Applied to literary writing, Horn sees the authorial sense of humour as the initiating impulse of comic experience: it is the author who on the one hand creates

ridiculous characters and events in the plot and on the other hand adequately communicates the comic content of the plot by means of authorial mockery (119). Lewis distinguishes between 'humour creation' and 'humour appreciation' in literary texts: he postulates an author with a sense of humour (5) able to apply textual strategies in a specific manner to create "*an incongruity: a pairing of ideas, images or events that are not ordinarily joined and do not seem to make sense together*" (8, emphasis in the original). The author's sense of humour and skill in constructing a text that contains incongruous and thus potentially comic elements is the creative part of how humour is generated in texts. Lewis also introduces an idea he calls 'humour appreciation', namely "*a two-stage process of first perceiving an incongruity and then resolving it*" (9, emphasis in the original). This part of the process depends on the recipient of the text, namely the reader.

My analysis of strategic use of humour in literary fiction is based upon the following premises[8]: comic impulses are not generated by accident but are a strategic result of textual manoeuvres. The comic potential of these impulses is recognised and appreciated by the reader (D. Berger 21). Behind this calculating utilisation of comic effects on the textual level lies an agenda communicated by the novel that goes beyond the plain entertainment of the reader (D. Berger 13). With these premises, I place my study in the tradition of humour analysis in literary fiction, whose aim is to

> refine our understanding of the humor we perceive in literature by helping us see how it is structured, how it functions and how it is related to the expression of values – how, that is, it is one determinant or component of character, genre and writer. (Lewis xi)

Echoing Lewis' proposition, the purpose of my analysis is to broaden the understanding of comic effects in British migrant fiction and the agendas the novels of this genre pursue with the help of the comic.

The first two sections of the theory chapter (II.1 + II.2) outline the relation (and contrast) between post-colonial concepts and fiction and British migrant fiction. As I postulate that British migrant fiction moves 'beyond the post-colonial', I will first discuss crucial post-colonial parameters that come under comic attack in migrant texts. The focus of these two sections also lies on the difference between humour as a strategy in post-colonial fiction and humour as a technique in British migrant fiction. In my analysis, I question the assumption that humour functions exclusively

[8] These premises have been similarly proposed by Berger (2008), Lewis (1989) and Horn (1988).

as yet another strategy of 'writing back' against neo-colonial tendencies. Instead, I will argue that comic effects in the novels at hand propose and contribute to 'non-post-colonial' views, namely critical belonging, universalism and humanism. These views represent a step beyond post-colonial postulates. From the post-colonial perspective, humanism and universalism for instance are considered ideologies that impose Eurocentric values serving Western political interests and aesthetic criteria – masked, however, as universal values of human nature.[9]

In the third section of the theory chapter (II.3) I will discuss properties of comic texts and how humour is communicated to the reader. How are comic effects generated on the textual level? Is there a general quality to words, remarks, jokes, characters, situations or textual strategies that stimulates amusement in the reader? In answering these questions, I will draw from Wolfgang Iser's notion (1979) of the 'implicit reader' as the inherent addresee of textual guidance. With the help of Iser's theory, I will discuss how comic effects contained in a text are meant to address a reading entity that is able to perceive and receive the text's comic potential and also, how comic effects guide the implicit reader towards particular postulates of a text.

As I have stated earlier, functions of comic effects in a text are manifold. Therefore, I find it important to take into consideration a variety of functions of humour ranging from 'affiliative' to 'aggressive' (a model proposed by Martin et al. 2003). Comic effects as a means of post-colonial 'oppositionality' (Ball 2) or 'writing back' do not do sufficient justice to the complexity of humour in British migrant or any other fiction. As Lewis states, humour "can be innocent, in Freud's sense of the word, or tendentious, hostile or benign, oppressive or revolutionary, … it can support or undermine accepted norms, … [and] it both highlights and dismisses incongruities" (39). For this reason, Lewis and other critics advocate an overarching theoretical approach towards what humour can accomplish as a strategic device in literary fiction. I will follow this argumentation by taking several main threads of scholarly research on humour into account. My theoretical grid on humour includes traditional humour theories by Bergson and Bachtin as well as several hypotheses originating from various fields of academic interest including philosophy, social studies and linguistics. The starting point of my examination are passages with comic potential: I will analyse their comic quality and the contextual location of the comic

[9] Moore-Gilbert ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*); Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989); Yousaf (2002).

effect: who or what is being targeted? Is the comic effect an indicator of sympathy, benevolence or hostility on the part of the narrator? Based upon my analysis of textual examples with humorous potential in British migrant fiction, I will explore how the novels of this genre tackle post-colonial concepts and ideas, subjecting them to comic disruption and abandoning them for new approaches that go 'beyond the post-colonial'.

The first novel under survey is Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (chapter III.1). It is a portrayal of the troublesome childhood of an Indian girl in the fictional mining village of Tollington where the 9-year-old Meena Kumar desperately wants to belong to an all-white English gang of adolescents. The versatility of the comic becomes visible through the eyes of the first-person child-narrator who, in retrospective, revisits her childhood desire to find a place to belong. Being the narrator of the novel, Meena is also its main protagonist caught between two cultures, who manages to mock and ridicule both these cultures to an equal degree. Meena criticises communal expectations and xenophobia existing in both worlds – the English and the Indian – and yet she still wants to find her place within these two worlds. Based upon my analysis of comic effects in *Anita and Me*, I will argue that Meena establishes a relation of 'critical belonging' to both her Indian culture of heritage and the local culture of Tollington. My analysis prioritises belonging as a concept that is problematic in the post-colonial discourse; in fact, critics suggest that in a hybridised, ever-changing world, belonging is rendered impossible.[10] In contrast to that, I will demonstrate how comic effects in *Anita and Me* reflect Meena's ambition to belong to and criticise both cultures she arises from.

Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (chapter III.2) has received enormous attention from post-colonial critics. The comic tone of Kureishi's novel has garnered similar attention: the flamboyant cheekiness with which Kureishi's first-person narrator observes and mocks everyone around him has been interpreted as post-colonial rebellion against neo-colonial oppression (Carey 1997) and grotesque exposure of racism (Ross 2006). Dissociating from these positions, I postulate that the comic effects in *The Buddha of Suburbia* uncover a highly hypocritical world full of false, inconsistent and flawed characters – regardless of their ethnicity, age or gender. This fact is reflected in the narrator's heavy ridicule of

[10] Bhabha (1997); McLeod (2000); Bromley (2000).

both the British mainstream *and* the immigrant community – a pronounced attempt made by the novel to overcome the 'burden of representation' imposed upon Kureishi's writing. Furthermore, I will argue that the application of comic impulses in *The Buddha of Suburbia* points to a universalist message of the novel. In exposing all-encompassing human inconsistencies, *The Buddha of Suburbia* cuts against the grain of post-colonial agendas, thus leaving the domain of post-colonial fiction.

Chapter III.3 is dedicated to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Smith's novel captures the lives of three families – the Iqbals, the Joneses and the Chalfens – of Bengali, English and Carribbean and Jewish-Catholic descent, respectively. The novel's focus lies mainly on the intercultural friendship between the white and British Archibald Jones, and Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi. *White Teeth* is commonly known for its omniscient narrator's playful and ironic view; this playfulness has been interpreted as either an exaggerated comic tone of a 'hysterically realist' novel (Wood 2004) or an expression of celebration of a new, hybrid and multicultural Britain (Head 2003). My study does not concur with any of these positions. I argue that with the help of comic effects, *White Teeth* contours a disturbing portrait of multicultural London. Despite the omnipresence of multicultural experience and hybridity in British society, everything Smith's characters seem to do is try to overcome and erase their hybrid selves by falling prey to essentialist ideological mindsets that allegedly offer easy orientation. With the help of the comic, *White Teeth* questions the post-colonial celebration of hybridity and explores human flaws and inconsistencies beyond racial and cultural boundaries.

What these examples will illustrate is that the comic mode in British migrant fiction serves as a tool of criticism of post-colonial concepts and rejection of post-colonial delineations in favour of more general assumptions about humanity. Post-colonial agency and 'appropriate' representation of minority characters is put into question, as is hybridity. The novels comically point to the gap between how post-colonial hybrid subjects should ideally behave according to post-colonial premises and how human beings *actually* behave, thus prioritising human traits and interests that lie beneath post-colonial postulates.

II British Migrant Fiction: Context, Genre and the Importance of Humour

1. Points of Departure: Assessing the Post-Colonial

In a pool of genre classifications, how much sense does it make to coin yet another brand for literary writing that emerges from Britain's plurality of cultures? One look at the genre labels fashioned to describe migrant literature produced in Britain in the last two or so decades reveals an arsenal of terms ranging from rather general labels such as 'contemporary British' fiction (Lane, Mengham, and Tew 2003; Acheson 2005; English 2006) to more specific ones such as "novel[s] of marginality" (N. Allen 3) or *Narratives for a New Belonging* (Bromley 2000). Some genre classifications reflect the immigrant background of the writers or the ethnic community from which they originate – as is the case with Ranasinha's focus on works written by South-Asian writers in Britain (Ranasinha 2007) or Nasta's *Fictions of the South-Asian Diaspora in Britain* (2002). Genres such as 'Black British literature' (Stein 2004) assume a common 'black experience' beyond the mere colour of one's skin visible in the oeuvre of writers of non-white origin situated in Britain.[11] Finally, Childs, Weber and Williams suggest that Britain's metropolis has long since become a *post-colonial* arena due to its post-Empire immigration, as "the arrival of sizeable populations from former colonies in the imperial heartlands creates conditions under which the latter may in some senses claim to be post-colonial" (13). For this reason, their study on *Post-colonial Theory and Literatures: African, Caribbean and South Asian* (2006) contains sections on works by writers such as Chinua Achebe and V.S. Naipaul side by side with the British 'born-and-bred' Hanif Kureishi who, as Childs and his co-scholars suggest, addresses aspects of the post-colonial condition in British contexts and localities. Similarly, several critics favour post-colonial readings of recent migrant fiction including the novels under survey. David Punter includes Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* in his study on *Postcolonial Imaginings* (2000) based upon the assumption that the novel may have been written in Britain, but it is embedded in deeper contexts of colonial and post-colonial history that continue to exist in the quotidian experience of immigrant

[11] Interestingly enough, Stein suggests that *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Anita and Me* and *White Teeth* also belong to his concept of 'Black British literature'. However, as I will demonstrate in the course of my analysis, a 'common black experience' is a conception highly problematised in these novels.

communities (7). Helga Ramsey-Kurz concludes that *White Teeth* is a post-colonial novel by examining its comic effects. What she suggests is that Smith's comic treatment of militant fundamentalism and terrorism in *White Teeth* points to a post-colonial agenda of her novel: the comic effects operating within *White Teeth* serve as a post-colonial counter-strategy against deterministic world-views and regimes (regardless of how allegedly rebellious, anti-imperialist and anti-Western they are) (Ramsey-Kurz 85).

These post-colonial readings and interpretations of migrant fiction in contemporary Britain reveal two general criteria that determine an alleged 'post-colonial nature' of novels: first, a deep interest in a range of post-colonial concerns and second, strategies with which these novels aspire to advertise post-colonial topics and agendas. As my insight into the key concerns and techniques of post-colonial writing will show, humour is a narrative strategy conventionally considered compatible with agendas of post-colonial writing. As a result, comic effects in British migrant fiction have also been read as instruments suitable for the ostensible post-colonial messages of these novels. In my view, the connection between the comic and the post-colonial has been taken for granted and applied too easily to the novels at hand. I will therefore substantiate the difference between post-colonial writing and British migrant fiction by revisiting crucial concepts of the post-colonial discourse and discussing how they are challenged in *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *White Teeth*.

1.1 Key Concerns of Post-Colonial Theory and Writing

In general, post-colonial narratives are engaged in addressing several typical key concerns: opposition against imperial centres of power, agency and empowerment of the marginalised, and creation of new identity concepts. These three literary missions go hand in hand and are often intertwined. In his analysis of the *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), John Ball paraphrases the first two central features of post-colonial fiction, namely 'oppositionality' and 'referentiality':

> Oppositionality is variously articulated as resistance, subversion, counter-discourse, contestatory narrative, writing back, and critique. Referentiality, which Stephen Slemon calls 'a crucial strategy for survival in marginalized social groups' ('Modernism's' 5), is related to the concepts of agency, materiality, and historicality, through which specific local or national contexts and subjects for writing are privileged. (Ball 2)

As regards ‘oppositionality’, what precisely are post-colonial novels countering? Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out that the novels oppose hierarchies of power between the imperial centre and its disempowered margins established by colonial enterprise and ideology (83). Similarly, Ball points to the “hierarchical binaries of Empire” such as “center/margin, master/slave, self/other, [and] civilized/savage” (2).

From the early beginnings of the post-colonial discourse, power assymetries between the binary poles outlined above have been highlighted and criticised by scholars. This concern has remained indispensable within the post-colonial field of study to this day and has continued to play a role in the criticism of literary texts (see King 85). As an early represenative of the post-colonial paradigm and critique of power dissimiliarities, Edward Said has focused on the contrast between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ as a strategy of colonialist practice that had political, social and economic consequences and implications for the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. According to Said in his study of ‘Orientalism’, the colonialist enterprise has justified its political and cultural dominion and economic exploitation of the colonised regions with the help of a set of stereotypes and assumptions about what constitutes this sphere commonly referred to as the colonised ‘Orient’. In Orientalist ideology, the Orient serves as the imaginary ‘Other’ of the West, embodying non-Western and thus objectionable characteristics such as irrationality, lack of sense, lack of emotional control, and lack of logic and morality. Naturally, the West represents the positive antipode to the backwardness of the Orient in this picture, being “rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values [and being] without natural suspicion” (Said 49).

The impact this colonialist discrimination has on its allegedly deficient ‘Other’, the colonialised subject, is devastating. Frantz Fanon contemplates the consequences of this derogatory perspective projected upon himself as the colonial ‘Other’, sensing that the racial dehumanisation with which he is approached as a black man escalates to the degree that he ceases to perceive *himself* as a human being:

> [C]ompletely dislocated [and] unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? (Fanon qtd. in McLeod, *Beginning* 20: 112 f)

It lies in the interest of post-colonial theory and writing to investigate the negative effects of the discriminatory system of colonial rule and neo-colonial thinking as

portrayed by Fanon and criticised by Said. Post-colonial critics and writers are engaged in uncovering present-day traces of colonialist (and Orientalist) patterns and thinking and putting them on display in literary texts, thus intervening against (neo-) colonial practices.

Besides, post-colonial writing offers agency for the marginalised 'Other' who is not only dehumanised but also entirely silenced by colonial hegemony. According to Said, colonial rule has literally deprived colonised subjects of their voices and their right to represent themselves:

> [The white coloniser] … speak[s] for [the colonised] in the sense that what they might have to say, were they to be asked and might they be able to answer, would somewhat uselessly confirm what is already evident: that they are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves. Their great moments were in the past; they are useful in the modern world only because the powerful and up-to-date empires have effectively brought them out of the wretchedness of their decline and turned them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies. (Said 34 f)

White colonisers act and speak in place of the civilised West and the best their civilisation has to offer; however, they make equal claims upon the representation of their colonised subjects. As Said suggests above, the prior claim to speak and act on behalf of the colonised serves the general imperialist conviction that colonial pretensions are based upon the ('good') colonial will to uplift the colonised from the state of primitiveness into the light of civilisation and economic productivity. Consequently, any attempts on the part of colonial subjects to speak up for themselves are annihilated for their own 'benefit' by their colonial rulers. The right to chronicle history is only one example of colonial monopoly in the representation and silencing of the colonised population. Childs, Mengham and Tew argue that historical events such as the Indian 'Mutiny' of 1857 were intentionally disguised by colonial historiographers as acts of cowardice and sabotage against the Empire while the Indian perspective on the incident was silenced by the dominant discourse of history and politics: "The possibility that indigenous people might be active agents in the making (if not the writing) of their own histories was something which was rarely if ever entertained by Western writers, and then usually in highly negative terms" (Childs, Mengham and Tew 23).

Where colonised subjects are silenced by colonial hegemony and historiography, post-colonial writing is at pains to reverse this process. Ball sees the completion of this agenda in the works of post-colonial authors who belong to a

specific national or cultural context and who, in their fiction, lend their voices to subjects marginalised by colonial force (2). By offering the colonised and disempowered 'Other' a space for articulation and argument, post-colonial novels actively pursue an agenda of empowerment, self-determination of the colonised subject and, at the end of the day, "liberation from coercive European political structures, epistemologies, and ideologies" (Ball 3).

Besides opposition and agency, the exploration and creation of new identity concepts and cultural spheres is another strategy essential for 'writing back'against the Empire. Originally, this idea of a new understanding of identity and culture stems from a branch of post-colonial theory represented by Homi Bhabha. In Bhabha's study *The Location of Culture* (1997), the relation between the colonial authority and the colonised subject is not as separate and irreconcilable as Said's observations of the coloniser and the colonised might suggest. Bhabha argues that the two cultures, the imperial power and the colonised, enter an arena of cultural cross-fertilisation where cultural markers and identities are dynamically transformed and continually negotiated. Bhabha refers to this zone between cultures as 'Third Space', a space which has transformatory power to challenge essentialist discourses of culture and identity:

> It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha 37)

What Bhabha points out is the momentum of the Third Space to contest notions of cultural purity and essentialist markers that constitute a 'pure' culture. Bhabha's Third Space is furthermore the sphere from which hybridised identities emerge and operate. For Bhabha, the process of hybridization is a strategy of subversion against monolithic concepts of an enclosed superior colonial culture; the representatives of hybridity are colonised subjects who, by adopting techniques such as mimicry[12] of the colonial ruling elite, disrupt its alleged cultural coherence and authority (112). As all delineations that mark categories such as race, class or gender are

[12] For Bhabha, mimicry is a process of both imitation of colonial practice and interrogation and distortion of colonial practice. As the colonial Other adopts and mimics colonial behaviour and thinking, they introduce ambiguity to the authority of colonial practice because of their double-edged imitation; they are 'the same, but not quite' (86). While the colonial Other appropriates itself to colonial practice, it simultaneously subverts the immutability and authority of the colonial rule: "The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (Bhabha 88, emphasis in the original).

constantly transformed and negotiated, hybrid subjects refute hermetic categorisations of identity (Bhabha 219). Their new hybridised identities are based upon negotiation in a permanent state of in-betweenness. On the other hand, categories such as roots or belonging are excluded in Bhabha's Third Space, "where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides*, *in-between*" (Bhabha 219, emphasis in the original).

Moving from theory to post-colonial fiction, the question arises how Bhabha's notion of the Third Space and hybrid in-betweenness of the colonial subject is implemented in post-colonial fiction. Dominic Head states that after WW II, post-colonial writers mostly focused on the antagonism between hybrid subjects and fixed discourses of nation, thematising how myths of static national identities impeded the development of hybrid identities (Head 108). In contrast to that, more recent tendencies in post-colonial literature are engaged not so much in the contest between the hybrid and the national but in the realisation of the hybrid identity itself. In other words, the trend in post-colonial writing is to portray how the hybrid transformation and negotiation of culture and identity is carried out in the text (Head 108). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that the promotion of hybridity in post-colonial writing is reflected in its 'hybrid nature': "It is inadequate to read [post-colonial writing] either as a reconstruction of pure traditional values or as simply foreign and intrusive. The reconstruction of 'pure' cultural value is always conducted within a radically altered dynamic of power relations" (110). A post-colonial narrative is ambiguous and evasive; portrayals of cultural or national purity are intermingled and 'hybridised' by portrayals of hybrid identities that subvert power hierarchies promoted by colonialist or national myths.

Since hybrid identities play a vital role in post-colonial fiction, the rather intricate question arises as to what the *essence* of these hybridised post-colonial identities is. What is precarious about being hybrid? What obstacles are there to be overcome? And what are the strategies with which hybrid individuals ideally operate in a post-colonial environment? I will highlight two facets of the post-colonial discourse that outline what post-colonial identities leave behind (conventional notions of home and belonging) and what they are reaching for (hybridity). This characterisation of post-colonial hybrid individuals is essential for the progression of my analysis, as it exacerbates the contrast between hybridity as promoted in post-colonial discourse and its day-to-day manifestation in British migrant fiction.

As pointed out above, home and belonging are precarious concepts for hybrid identities. As Bhabha suggests, hybridised identities occupy a Third Space between two cultures while at the same time *not* belonging to either of them (219). Consequently, belonging is a problematic condition for hybrid identities as they constantly challenge the fixity and the unity of a culture to which they are supposed to belong. As John McLeod points out,

> [c]onventional ideas of 'home' and 'belonging' depend upon clearly-defined, static notions of being 'in place', firmly rooted in a community or a particular geographical location. We might think of the discourses of nationalism, ethnicity or 'race' as examples of models of belonging which attempt to root the individual within a clearly-defined and homogenised group. (*Beginning* 214)

With the post-colonial hybrid subject always in motion and constantly transforming categories of identity such as religion, race or ethnicity, the concepts of home and belonging no longer seem to apply. In times of global migration and enormous intercultural encounters around the globe, it is precarious for the post-colonial subject to hold on to categories of home and belonging as they imply sedentariness and fixedness of post-colonial sites as well as exclusive membership of one single category that determines identity (McLeod, *Beginning* 214). Instead, the focus of the post-colonial condition should lie in the exploration of "new models of identity … which depend upon reconsidering the perilous 'in-between' position … as a site of excitement, new possibilities, and even privilege" (*Beginning* 214). Put differently, the only belonging that appears to be feasible for the post-colonial individual is the dwelling *between* cultural contexts in hopes of fulfilment of the promises this position allegedly offers. Even more, it is a 'privilege' to be hybrid.

Traditionally, 'oppositionality', agency for the disenfranchised, and promotion of hybridity constitute the main pillars of post-colonial theory and have been applied (and are still applied) to writing that is produced in the former colonies of the British Empire. More recently, critics suggest that these parameters of 'writing back' manifest themselves in writing that emerges right from within the former Empire, namely today's Britain. This critical assumption that Britain is now as post-colonial as its ex-colonies has resulted in an academic discourse and practice that facilitates post-colonial readings of contemporary fiction in Britain – including British migrant fiction.

And yet, what do critics mean when they claim that Britain today is in itself post-colonial? What individuals and groups are considered post-colonial? What

circumstances illustrate the post-colonial condition in Britain and how are they literarily reflected? And how is British migrant fiction different from the post-colonial?

The question “who is post-colonial?” (Childs, Mengham, and Tew 13) does not allow for a simple answer. It appears that both the subjects of formerly colonised regions and the white population at the heart of the former imperial centre are 'post-colonised'; they are both undergoing a transformation of their identities affected by intercultural contact in the colonial past and the now post-colonial, metropolitan present: “[M]ajor reformulations are taking place, with the identities of both the formerly colonized or diasporic groups and the imperial nations unsettled in different ways by colonial and post-colonial histories” (Childs, Mengham, and Tew 14). Analysing the dispersal of the 'post-colonial condition' after the arrival of immigrants in the metropolitan centres of Britain, Childs and his co-scholars echo Homi Bhabha’s idea that the colonialist disruption of the colonised cultures is now reversed (13); as former colonies have been colonised by the imperial centre, their colonised subjects have now arrived at the heart of the former Empire and 'post-colonised' it. Hall argues that due to these circumstances, Britain’s self-image has been subverted in many ways:

> The post-colonial moment in Britain is the moment after Empire, when British identities have been imagined anew, when ‘we’ are no longer the centre. A moment of potential, when ‘we’ could come to terms with the myth of homogeneity, when ‘we’ could recognise the inequalities associated with the different raced and gendered ways of belonging to the British nation/state, when ‘we’ could have built a different kind of future which was inclusive rather than exclusive, when whiteness would not be a condition of belonging. (Hall qtd. in Flint 45: 76)

According to this statement, the post-colonial environment in Britain has lead to a disruption of the British national myth, debunking it as an illusion propagated by a selective and biased history and national memorisation. Whiteness, homogeneity and purity are no longer constituents of an alleged British identity. It is difference, heterogeneity, plurality and negotiation of identity instead (Hall qtd. in Flint 45: 76). Once a place of contact between the coloniser and the colonised across the British Empire, the post-colonial locale has moved to Britain’s multi-cultural sites. The post-colonial focus is now placed on the cultural suspense between the white British population and migrant communities arriving to Britain from formerly colonised areas.

Bhabha's notions of hybridity and the Third Space also continue to operate in the post-colonial arena in today's Britain. However, instead of colonised subjects who hybridise the environment between the colonial rulers and themselves, it is now immigrants from former colonies who create hybrid diasporic sites with their presence in Britain. McLeod points to the general post-colonial tendency to conceive the concept of immigrant diasporas as a force hybridising the cultural mainstream:

> The concept of hybridity has proved very important for diaspora peoples, and indeed many others too, as a way of thinking beyond exclusionary, fixed, binary notions of identity based on ideas of rootedness and cultural, racial and national purity. (McLeod, *Beginning* 219).

The hybrid and disrupted nature of the diasporic communities in Britain is reflected in the writings emerging from these communities, as they engage in re-inscribing dominant discourses of identity (such as that of a homogeneous nation) and explore new creative concepts of identity beyond national or any other markers (Bromley 7). In other words, post-colonial fiction in Britain captures its hybridisation and transformation of established contexts of culture, nation and identity.

Besides hybridity, the traditional agendas of post-colonial opposition against imperial forces and agency for the marginalised have also found their place in post-colonial readings of literary portraits of multicultural Britain. Critics suggest that colonialist practices such as 'Othering' have not vanished from now post-colonial contact zones between immigrants and the native population. As soon as they enter the country, immigrants face social and institutionalised rejection while diasporic communities who already live in Britain encounter animosities in the same manner: "[T]he 'othered' border crosser met, and continues to meet, that hostility reserved for the stranger who comes today, and the discriminatory and exclusionary legislation shaped for the stranger who stays, or might stay, tomorrow" (Bromley 2). Bearing the continuity of racial hostility in mind, literary representations of the marginalised form a crucial counter-strategy against neo-colonial tendencies in Britain's post-colonial society. According to Nicola Allen, it is now writing from the margins of present-day Britain with which established hierarchies of power are questioned. Authors who prioritise perspectives of marginalised outcasts posit 'protest', 'deviancy' and an attempt to subvert dominant discourses of power (N. Allen 40).

By laying its focus on the marginalised, hybrid and immigrant 'Other', post-colonial fiction in Britain offers agency and opposition against latent, open and institutionalised neo-colonial practices such as 'Othering' and racial discrimination.

Also, it challenges national myths of superiority and national homogeneity that discriminate against immigrant communities. Marginalisation and disenfranchisement of the immigrant population lie at the core of the concerns of post-colonial fiction in Britain. Simultaneously, its novels lay their focus on the promotion and creation of new forms of hybrid identities.

Throughout the years, post-colonial studies have established themselves well in the academic field (see King 85); more recently, however, they have undergone an internal process of re-evaluation, particularly in the first decade of the new millenium. Despite the criticism that the post-colonial discourse has been 'around too long' (King 85) or even an 'exhausted paradigm' (Wilson et al. 1), it has gradually come to allow for self-critique and voices that put post-colonial concepts up for negotiation. David Punter (2000) is at pains to highlight that "[t]he postcolonial is a field in which everything is contested, everything is contestable, from one's reading of a text to one's personal, cultural, racial, national standpoint, perspective and history" (10). One such pathbreaking re-examination of the post-colonial is Wilson, Şandru and Lawson Welsh's collection of essays *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium* (2010), which explores the potential of post-colonial theory in the wake of millenial globalization, metropolitanism and new assymetries of power across the globe. Wilson et al. acknowledge that post-colonial concepts and views are in need of re-assessment if they are to compete with theories of globalization in assessing the most urging concerns in the future: "[N]eat and conveniently unified conceptions of what is deemed 'postcolonial' – such as the anti-colonial centre/peripheries binary – often fail to account for the very intellectual energies that have so far kept the field dynamic and responsive to change" (3).

Among several critical essays on the post-colonial, Simon Gikandi uncovers a discrepancy between the post-colonial ideal of hybrid cosmopolitanism and its actual manifestations in allegedly post-colonial metropolitan spaces in Britain. In his argument, immigrant communties in urban areas are not representatives of a vibrant hybrid identity, but prone to traditionalist mindsets and rigid lifestyles:

> [I]n the metropolitan spaces in which we perform our postcolonial identities and their requisite gestures of arrival, the existence of a mass of people who seem to hold on to what we consider archaic cultures (those who wear bhakas in classrooms, or slaughter sheep in the tubs of suburb houses, or 'circumcise' their daughters in hidden alleys) seem to disturb the temporality of postcolonialism and the terms of its routing. Among the lower strata of

> migrant populations what we see is not the façade of cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism heralded by postcolonial elites, but signs of radical attachment to older cultural forms which seems to mock the politics of postcolonial identity … . (Gikandi 25)

Gikandi differentiates between 'politics of postcolonial identity' and quotidian immigrant practices; his observations are a far cry from the post-colonial conviction that immigrants hybridise the hegemonial mainstream culture. Rather, they are keepers of demarcation lines along which rigid identities are determined. Gikandi's critique of an allegedly hybrid cosmopolitanism among immigrant communities is symptomatic for a growing awareness that post-colonial theory is contradicted (and let down) by everyday life.

Gikandi makes a valid point that I will elaborate further in my analysis. One of the major shortcomings of post-colonial readings of migrant literature is the unquestioned application of post-colonial ideas onto realities in texts that offer rather disturbing representations of immigrant identities very much unlike post-colonial identities. In other words, the mere fact that the protagonists of a text are immigrants does not mean that they are hybrid and ever-evolving identities by default, challenging the hegemony of a unified mainstream culture. Still, such automatisms are widely spread within the post-colonial dicourse despite the fact that post-colonial theory has moved forward in the last decade.

When it comes to humour in migrant writing, there is far-reaching consensus that it serves post-colonial agendas of resistance against neo-colonial hegemony, ambassadorship for the silenced 'Other' and promotion of hybridity. Humour is considered a viable device in pursuing these post-colonial objectives. In post-colonial fiction, comic effects can indeed serve as an instrument of opposition (Reichl and Stein 12) against present-day off-shoots of colonial hegemony and disempowerment of the colonised. However, as my analysis will show, this approach is short-sighted; comic impulses in British migrant fiction operate as an instrument of narrative critique *against* the post-colonial and as a catalyst for new perspectives that outreach post-colonial fields of thought.

1.2 Promoting Post-Colonial Agendas? Humour as a Strategy in Post-Colonial Fiction

Comic effects in post-colonial literature have come under increasing survey in recent years, as a range of monographs, collections of essays and articles

demonstrate. John Ball for instance, examines satirical writing in post-colonial fiction in his *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel* (2009), exploring the fact that satirical elements function in a variety of ways in post-colonial fiction. Ball, however, focuses on fiction originating from more 'traditional' post-colonial locations, namely formerly colonised nations and regions. Earlier, in 2005, one of the key collections on the topic, *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, was released. Edited by Reichl and Stein, this assembly of essays centres on humour as a strategy used by various post-colonial writers to accentuate post-colonial agendas in their novels. As it happens in this edition, Zadie Smith and Hanif Kureishi (authors I both associate with British migrant fiction) are juxtaposed with writers from former British colonies such as David Foster (Australia) or Mordecai Richler (Canada), based upon the manner with which their novels ostensibly implement comic effects to pursue post-colonial concerns. Another collection of articles on humour in intercultural contexts is the more recent *Hybrid Humour: Comedy in Transcultural Perspectives* (2010) edited by Dunphy and Emig. It includes a contribution by Rainer Emig, who examines the link between humour and hybridity in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* – and thereby clearly evokes connections between humour and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Third Space in this novel.

As these examples show, humour plays a vital role in post-colonial fiction and *can* serve as a stimulating force for the overall post-colonial message of its novels. However, at this stage, I find it important to recall the objections articulated by Bruce King at the very beginning of my analysis: post-colonial readings and methodology have established themselves in the academic field to the extent that narratives are now approached along post-colonial lines regardless of their compatibility with post-colonial agendas. Similarly, the alliance between the comic tone and its post-colonial potential has gained similar academic momentum. Critics have implicitly (and as I will argue, prematurely) assumed that the comic effects visible in recent British fiction written by authors with migrant backgrounds point to post-colonial agendas discernible in their novels. As a consequence, the comic mode in *White Teeth*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *Anita and Me* has been mainly approached as an instrument that serves to promote post-colonial concerns of these novels[13]– a conclusion that my analysis calls into question.

[13] Knopp (2009); Dunphy (2004); Carey (1997); Holmes (2002); Ross (2006).

As regards the correlation between the comic and the post-colonial, critics first of all state that humour is a deliberate strategic impulse "self-consciously employed and strategically positioned in textual constructions" in post-colonial fiction (Reichl and Stein 2). Reichl and Stein are at pains to point out that humour serves many purposes in post-colonial texts, ranging from post-colonial opposition to comic relief and placation of intercultural conflicts:

> The concrete manifestations of laughter arising from such a constellation range from subversive laughter, carnivalesque exhilarations, wry smiles, self-deprecation, gallows humour, or black humour, to more conciliatory and healing humour, or to the wild and eerie laughter of the otherwise silenced 'madwoman in the attic.' (Reichl and Stein 9)

The critics underline the versatility of humour in post-colonial fiction, as it can be aggressive and benevolent, self-deprecating or ridiculing others. Acknowledging the complexity of humour as a textual phenomenon, Reichl and Stein conclude that shaping a general theory of humour and the post-colonial would be a futile undertaking. Instead, singular approaches to instances of mockery and comic effects in post-colonial writing are considered to be more viable and fruitful (Reichl and Stein 6 f). However, and here Reichl and Stein indeed dare to make a general statement, comic effects in post-colonial literature always "reflect a struggle for agency, an imbalance of power, and a need, a desire, for release" (9). According to this, humour stands for a variety of comic impulses that can be directed aggressively or sympathetically against many targets in post-colonial fiction. Yet, its overall function is the implementation of the aforementioned post-colonial agendas of opposition and agency. In the following section, I will explore the question how humour serves as an assistant narrative tool in promoting opposition and agency in post-colonial writing. However, my observations are not to be understood as a general theory on humour and the post-colonial. Rather, they serve as an overview of the main current tendencies discussing comic effects in post-colonial fiction. Also, they represent a point of departure for my critical discussion of comic effects in British migrant fiction.

As Ball, Ashcroft and others remind us in the previous more general segments on post-colonial theory, 'oppositionality' and contestation of existing power asymmetries are some of the key concerns of the post-colonial paradigm (Ball 2; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 83). Consequently, what post-colonial texts combat with the help of comic effects are manifestations of unequal distribution of power

aggravated by myths of national superiority, colonial Othering and neo-colonial racism in Britain's post-colonial environment of today. The overall anti-racist (and therefore post-colonial) agenda of Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, for instance, is said to be visible in the narrator's derision of racist characters such as 'Hairy Back', a follower of Enoch Powell, and his right-wing views on immigration:

> Within the comedy of the text, we are presented with Hairy Back as an anachronistic buffoon, and we are invited to laugh him off the page. The pleasure of the text, in other words, is completely invested here in the reader's willingness to participate in the text's anti fascist critique. (Morrison 183)

As regards *White Teeth*, Squires argues that the comic deflation of racism and the text's agenda to reduce it to absurdity unveil the anti-racist message of the novel (40). Similarly, Walters points out that the use of comic stereotypes in literature, and in *White Teeth* in particular, serves "as a satirical device to expose racism, sexism, and other biases" ("Still Mammies" 127). As these comments demonstrate, caricaturing racist characters, subversion of preconceived ethnic bias and exposure of latent racism via comic effects are seen as major textual tools that serve anti-racist messages in post-colonial texts.

One particular theoretical approach to humour has played a vital role in post-colonial readings of racism and comic effects in the migrant fiction, namely the concept of carnivalesque laughter coined by Michail Bachtin. According to Bachtin, the medieval carnivalesque "celebrated the temporary liberation from the dominating truth and the existing social hierarchy, [and] the temporary abolition of hierarchical conditions, all privileges, norms and taboos" (58, my translation). Bachtin's theory of medieval carnival festivities has appealed to several critics as a valuable explanation for the comic mode in the novels under survey. It has served in particular to prove the liberating power behind the textual comic disruption of authority, dominion and paternalism in post-colonial novels. Ulrike Erichsen correctly states that the use of the Bachtinian perspective "with its emphasis on the subversion of an official ideology … can have a certain appeal to postcolonial studies" (Erichsen 30). It is thus not surprising that Holmes (2002), Carey (1997) and Ross (2006) have applied Bachtin's concept of the carnivalesque to examine the comic treatment of neo-colonial stereotypes and racist behaviour in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Holmes, for instance, identifies the language of the first-person narrator as the major source of the novel's comic potential and as an instrument that "inverts social norms of decorum in the process of exposing and reviling the abuses of power that [Karim as the narrator]

encounters as a member of a visible minority“ (645). Through humorous expressions and vulgar verbal abuse, Karim avoids victimization and activates the “anarchical spirit of carnival“ (Holmes 650) instead. Given the fact that the Bachtinian carnevalesque has played an integral part in post-colonial readings of the comic effects in the novels of migrant fiction, I will re-evaluate the post-colonial interpretation of Bachtin’s concept by postulating that the Bachtinian mockery foregrounds other agendas than post-colonial opposition and liberation of the post-colonial subject.

In her study on ethnic comedies across Europe, Schlote points to another important aspect that helps to understand the relationship between the comic mode of a novel and post-colonial representation of ethnicity. Schlote states that, in case they use comic effects in their novels, post-colonial and migrant writers are “expected to redeem … former enforced invisibilities [of the minority groups they are supposed to represent], [and] to correct any current stereotyped representations” imposed upon these marginalised groups (Schlote 184). In other words, comic effects in post-colonial texts are not only seen as instruments of post-colonial opposition, they are also considered a technique of empowerment of ethnicity and marginality. By contrast, British migrant fiction takes a highly critical approach to any ethnic ambassadorship imposed upon artists and writers with hyphenated identities and immigrant family ties. The novels comically dismiss any expectations to promote agency for the marginalised.

Critics have also focussed upon the relation between humour and hybridity and how the conception of new hybrid identities and lifestyles is propagated with the use of comic effects in post-colonial fiction. Eva Knopp states that the comic treatment of national purity and white Britishness in recent works such as *White Teeth* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* puts monolithic concepts of identity and nation to the test. Instead, the comic negotiation of fixed identities in these novels favours hybridity and cross-cultural concepts of identity (Knopp 65). Rainer Emig follows suit: in his study of *Anita and Me*, he argues that, as a novel of Asian-British comic fiction, it “indeed correspond[s] closely to Bhabha’s model of a third space. [It] fulfil[s] its criteria of hybridisation and exist[s] in a tension between national and global cultures and in a constant state of interrogation” (Emig 173). Unlike these two critics, Ball delivers a more critical perspective on the interplay of hybridity and satirical effects in post-colonial fiction. He claims that post-colonial novels at times satirically

negotiate the idea of hybridity as they attack negative outcomes that hybridity may have. According to Ball, the aim of such satirical critique of a far too positive perception of hybridity is to unmask its negative consequences:

> By emphasizing the negative fallout of hybridity, syncretism, and cross-cultural influence, it [postcolonial satire] does not attack these realities *per se* in favor of an uncontaminated precolonial state. … . If particular instances of hybridity as a legacy of Empire have led to unjust or absurd conditions, then the relations of power and influence that helped produce them need to be addressed in order that new structures, institutions, and models can be developed to support more positive versions of the postcolonial world's irreversible cultural syncretism. (Ball 39, emphasis in the original)

What I find particularly intriguing about Ball's idea of post-colonial satirisation of hybridity is the notion that hybridity does not seem to be an absolute and unequivocal ideal, but may show itself in flawed forms. Iin other words, (comic) criticism of hybridity is possible. However, Ball seems to suggest that the causes of flawed hybridity lie in unjust relations of power and dubious institutions that have misconceived hybridity and thus provoked 'unjust or absurd conditions'. The critic proposes that the unjust institutional misconceptions of hybridity need to be tackled and erased to generate new, more positive forms of hybridity while hybridity itself as a concept is left uncontested.

I agree with Ball's argument that hybridity may result in negative outcomes. However, I will interrogate his conclusion that the negative outcomes of hybridity are provoked by institutional misapprehension of this concept. As will become evident in the upcoming section on British migrant fiction, hybridity *itself* is comically re-negotiated as a highly problematic state of identity, both for the representatives of hybridity and for their allegedly hybridised post-colonial environment.

2. 'Beyond the Post-Colonial': Key Concerns of British Migrant Fiction

My discussion of British migrant fiction as an explicitly 'non-post-colonial' genre draws upon criticisms made by many scholars that post-colonial concepts are internally inconsistent and require more critical and thorough investigation.[14] Virtually every post-colonial idea – starting with Said's Orientalism or Bhabha's hybridity and Third Space – has come under fire of fellow scholars who critically

[14] Ahmad (1995); McClintock (1996); McLeod (2000); Punter (2000) and of course, King (2005).

assess its logic, clarity and plausibility. To begin with, Bart Moore-Gilbert points to the disputable nature of the term 'post-colonial':

> [T]he term has been so variously applied to such different kinds of historical moments, geographical region, cultural identities, political predicaments and affiliations, and reading practices. As a consequence, there has been increasingly heated, even bitter, contestation of the legitimacy of seeing certain regions, periods, socio-political formations and cultural practices as 'genuinely' postcolonial. (Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory* 11)

My analysis dovetails with Moore-Gilbert's argument. I argue that emerging genres like British migrant fiction actively express this kind of scepticism of the post-colonial paradigm. Here I would like to revisit the question from the beginning of this theory chapter: how expedient is it to coin a term for yet another genre in the light of an arsenal of genres and particularly in the light of the internal critique that already seems to exist within the post-colonial discourse? In my view, British migrant fiction does represent a novelty in this field as it does not only stand out because of its critical judgement of post-colonial ideas. It also introduces new approaches, world-views and perspectives that clearly abandon and in some cases overtly counter post-colonial concepts. It is a genre that features post-colonial critique *and* new conceptual horizons. As Roy Sommer reminds us, migrant writers write what they want to write about while clearly dismissing any agendas and ambassadorships they are expected to pursue by the public (8).

2.1 Contesting Post-Colonial Concepts and Fiction

What post-colonial concepts does British migrant fiction tackle and re-evaluate? And how does it accomplish this undertaking? To begin with, I find it necessary to point out that post-colonial parameters and perspectives are not entirely *dismissed* in migrant fiction. After all, they represent a starting point for the genre to explore what the 'post-colonial condition' in Britain is, and what may be left of post-colonial idea(l)s in the intercultural contact zones in Britain today. British migrant fiction addresses the main concerns of the post-colonial discourse that I have outlined in the previous section, namely 'oppositionality', 'referentiality', and hybridity. The aim of this fiction is not to reject post-colonial concepts as redundant or even needless. Rather, migrant fiction points to their shortcomings and advises against their unreflective perpetuation. In other words, what this genre seems to signal to the post-colonial discourse is: think again.

A closer look at the portrayals of racial issues reveals that migrant fiction takes a different approach towards this subject compared to the post-colonial literary focus on 'opposition' and anti-racism. Racism, xenophobia and essentialist thinking in British society are not denied in this new genre; in fact, its texts seem to suggest that racist thinking is a ubiquitous phenomenon that permeates all social classes and all communities. However, racism and discrimination against others is immanent to white and non-white characters alike. Racial and ethnic hostility is treated as a human pattern across gender, race, cultures and ethnicities. This outlook represents a deviation from the conventional post-colonial approach to racism and 'Othering' as a more one-sided phenomenon projected by the colonialists onto the colonialised (Said 1995) and, in more recent post-colonial contexts, by neo-colonial discourses of power onto the immigrant margins of the community.

As 'Othering' and the exclusion of others are portrayed as universal human phenomena, British migrant novels seem to mirror ideas on the universality of 'Othering' originating from other interdisciplinary branches. Christie Davies, a humour theorist and anthropologist, observes that the mechanism of cultural exclusion and 'Othering' is visible world-wide. Accordingly, Said's critical notion of colonial projections of human deficiencies onto the colonised 'Other' is visible in every society where "human deficiencies [are ascribed] to other ethnic groups in an excessive or ludicrous fashion" (Davies 307). What Davies observes in global empirical studies on ethnic humour parallels what Said has approached theoretically in his analysis of colonial enterprise, namely the fact that negative human qualities such as stupidity, backwardness, cowardice, profanity or lack of sexual morality are always attributed to the non-members of one's own ethnicity (Davies 15). Davies concludes that, due to the global occurrence of derision of the ethnic 'Other', anxiety towards the 'Other' is not only released but it also becomes visible as a "pretty universal" phenomenon (9). British migrant fiction echoes Davies' conclusions: racism and 'Othering' are abandoned as an exclusive deficiency of those in power. Instead, they are multi-directional and universal.[15]

What implications does Davies' conclusion have for the literary illustration of racism in British migrant fiction and how does this approach oppose post-colonial

[15] Along these lines, Hanif Kureishi discusses the universality of racism and xenophobia in his interview with the BBC World Book Club in 2003, stating that "all societies need racism" as it leads to in-group coherence and solidarity against its non-members (qtd. in "Hanif Kureishi *The Buddha of Suburbia*" n. pag.).

concerns? First of all, migrant victimhood caused by white racism is a notion this genre does not easily settle with as borderlines between perpetrators and victims are dissolved.[16] If, according to Davies, xenophobia and the exclusion of others are potential qualities immanent to every human society, they leave no room for innocence in post-colonial contexts and they seize to be a domain of white people as the usual suspects of racist thinking.[17] In British migrant fiction, racism is discussed as a human trait that prevents individuals from seeing their 'Other' (and themselves) as truly human, which is a phenomenon Hanif Kureishi openly decries in one of his essays:

> The evil of racism is that it is a violation not only of another's dignity, but also of one's own person or soul; the failure of connection with others is a failure to understand or feel what it is one's own humanity consists in, what it is to be alive, and what it is to see both oneself and others as being ends not means, and as having souls. (Kureishi, "The Rainbow Sign" 48 f)

Kureishi's statement appears to call upon an appreciation of humanity as the 'cure' for racist thinking and as an all-embracing idea that helps individuals to perceive common human features they share with their alleged 'Other' as being alive, being 'ends not means' and 'having souls'. As regards British migrant fiction, the genre proposes that racism is a universal human trait that, in Kureishi's words, prevents individuals from seeing the humanness in others and themselves. What appears as a strong post-colonial anti-racist critique in this fiction is embedded in a broader humanist context that demands a contestation of racism not as an antagonism between black and white or British and non-British, but as a human deficiency immanent to all individuals regardless of their ethnicity or the colour of their skin.

Besides racial issues, another key aspect of the post-colonial paradigm is the notion of agency or, in John Ball's words, 'referentiality'. What becomes evident in British migrant fiction is that the post-colonial desire for agency has somewhat escalated into what Kobena Mercer refers to as the 'burden of representation':

> When artists are positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production, they are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as 'representatives,' in that they are widely expected to 'speak for' the marginalized communities from which they come. (Mercer 235)

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[16] Both Susie Thomas and Philip Tew discuss the idea of victimization of the marginalised in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth*, respectively. They both come to the conclusion that due to the comic mode in these novels, migrant victimhood is challenged as a concept (*Hanif Kureishi* 84 f; Tew 16 f).

[17] I have outlined this idea in a paper presentation at the conference *In Analysis: The Work of Hanif Kureishi* in London on 25th February 2012.

In other words, representations of ethnicity in novels written by migrant authors are considered promotional and useful for their ethnic communities at large. They are supposed to signal intra-ethnic unity and solidarity, which eventually leads to communal empowerment. What Mercer points out is that the conception of one singular undivided and shared migrant experience does not exist, as British diasporas are shattered with difference and diversity. The idea that, for instance, black individuals unconditionally sympathise with other black individuals across the British Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities is a short-sighted perspective pursued by 'populist modernism'[18] (Mercer 251). Chambers cautions against the possible racist implications behind this agenda: writers with migrant or minority backgrounds are given artistic space inasmuch as they serve as ethnic insiders and competent cultural commentators on minority experience. As 'speakers for blackness' only, they do not have the privilege of white, non-ethnic writers and artists to address 'whiteness' or any other area of interest for that matter (Chambers 51). In other words, migrant writers are hindered in their aesthetic work and cemented in their marginal status of ambassadorship for race or ethnicity.[19] This notion of authorial agency for the marginalised is subjected to critical scrutiny in *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *White Teeth*; the criticism is realised in comic treatments of ethnicity and community. Portrayals of the ethnic and the communal brim with hostility, hypocrisy, *schadenfreude*, and, above all, a lack of sincere communion among its members. Beliefs that suggest a common experience of 'blackness' are continuously debunked as insubstantial. Textual strategies such as caricaturing and stereotypical exaggeration of ethnic characters belie any positive or appropriate representation of non-white ethnicity in British migrant fiction.

As a consequence, some of the authors have encountered outright public affront. Procter, for instance, points out that Kureishi's work has been repeatedly criticised for its rather unflattering portrayals of members of the British Asian

[18] 'Populist modernism' was a concept pursued by the African-American writer and artist Amiri Baraka. It was based upon the fundamental principle that art should not be detached from real life, but very much involved in daily concerns such as politics (Sollors 2). Throughout his life as an artist, Baraka mainly upheld the idea that black artists should represent an integral part of the community by raising awareness of what it means to be black (Sollors 189).

[19] As a matter of fact, Zadie Smith comments on artistic and political expectations imposed upon her writing as a mixed-race author: "Do you go to Don DeLillo and say, 'He doesn't represent middle-class white people enough'?... No. You give him complete freedom. Why would you limit writers of any ethnicity or gender to be a sex or class politician and give freedom to white writers to write about absolutely anybody?" (qtd. in Procter, "New Ethnicities" 102)

community ("New Ethnicities" 102). Once again: if there is such a thing as deliberate representation or agency visible in this genre, then it is the idea that the novels of British migrant fiction speak 'for themselves' while dismissing any political or aesthetic restraints (Sommer 8).

As post-colonial resistance and 'referentiality', hybridity is another key concern under critical survey in British migrant fiction. The novels thematise what it means to inhabit hybridised British contexts and localities and they portray hybridity and the experience of in-betweenness as counter-positions to ideas of national, ethnic or religious purity. However, the notion of a hybrid self and a hybridised environment does not inevitably result in positive cultural contacts and encounters. British migrant fiction comically questions the belief "that the process of hybridity, whatever its local and temporary difficulties, will nonetheless end up by adding to the sum of positive cultural experience", as Punter argues in his discussion of Bhabha's central postulates (Punter 15). Hybridity, as suggested in British migrant fiction, is *not* an altogether pleasant experience without fail. The allegedly hybridised post-colonial environment in Britain is permeated with essentialist thinking, myths of national, ethnic and religious purity, characters who readily embrace deterministic ideologies and others who take hybridity to its extremes. The hybridising potential ascribed to migrant communities and diasporas in post-colonial Britain is betrayed by the rise of fundamentalist and traditionalist concepts of identity within these groups. Here British migrant fiction dovetails with Simon Gikandi's previously mentioned critique of the discrepancy between the post-colonial ideal of hybrid cosmopolitanism and its actual manifestations in British post-colonial society (25). Bearing Gikandi's objections in mind, I argue that in this genre, the discrepancy between post-colonial idea(l)s of hybridity and the metropolitan manifestation of hybridity is highlighted and targeted. Traditional and conservative cultural practices have never left Britain's multi-cultural arena: the alleged immigrant 'hybridisers' are in fact poor representatives of post-colonial cosmopolitan identities as they fall back on conservatism and cultural isolation. Similarly, in his comments on Rushdie's and Bhabha's perception of hybridity in metropolitan locales, Aijaz Ahmad argues that the celebration of hybrid identities only applies to post-colonial intellectuals situated in the Western metropolis. Immigrants on the other hand, hardly truly embody hybrid identities as they in fact lack thorough understanding of hybridity and intercultural apprehension of both cultures they find themselves in (A. Ahmad 13). British

migrant fiction feeds upon Ahmad's argument: migrant in-betweenness is portrayed not as a state of mutual understanding and intellectual apprehension but as a state of cultural irritation. Ahmad also points to the disruption of identity and poverty caused by displacement and to intercultural borders in migrant communities that belie the hybrid condition as a dynamic and fruitful state of constant cultural transformation:

> Most migrants tend to be poor and experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment; what they seek is not displacement but, precisely, a *place* from where they may begin anew, with some sense of a stable future. Postcoloniality is also, like most things, a matter of class. (A. Ahmad 16, emphasis in the original)

As his last statement illustrates, Ahmad is not only concerned with the disruption of identity by the amorphous arbitrariness of cultural diversity, he also targets what seems a complete erasure of concepts such as class from post-colonial thinking. According to Ahmad, post-colonial subjects are internally stratified by class divisions between underprivileged immigrant communities and "the postcolonial [intellectual] who has access to … monumental and global pleasures [and who] is remarkably free of gender, class, [and] identifiable political location" (A. Ahmad 13). Ahmad's objection is valid: there is no such a thing as unity among post-colonial individuals all equally eager to embrace their hybridity and enjoy its blessings of constant reinvention of one's cultural self and the privilege of easily accommodating a plurality of cultures and transcultural awareness. What British migrant fiction points to instead is that post-colonial migranthood is a far cry from the cosmopolitan idea of hybrid intellectuals who transcend cultural borders without any effort.

Having stated this, I would like to recall the notion of belonging to a place or a culture that I have discussed in the section on post-colonial theory. Belonging has been identified as a problematic – if not infeasible – concept for post-colonial individuals in a hybrid environment as they steadily modify possible sites of belonging such as nation, ethnicity or religious affiliation (McLeod, *Beginning* 214; Bromley 1 f). However, as Ahmad's above argument illustrates, post-colonial migranthood seems to be a state of being that urges migrants to strive after havens they can belong to and feel at home in (A. Ahmad 16). Gikandi takes a more critical stance towards immigrant notion of belonging by claiming that it usually culminates in traditionalism, cultural isolationism and, from the post-colonial perspective, dubious practices that define cultural attachment (25).

British migrant fiction highlights the irony of constant immigrant undertakings

to overcome hybridity by more traditional notions of roots, culture and belonging. The characters in the novels at hand, for example, are trapped in neverending and tedious pursuits of categories that will determine their identities and offer cultural orientation. For the migrant population, the notion of a diaspora that offers such orientation becomes crucial. Presented by post-colonial critics as arenas of cultural fluidity, diasporic communities in British migrant fiction are portrayed as sites of conservative cultural preservation and, as such, represent hermetic refuges from instability and cultural arbitrariness in a hybrid environment. Instead of accentuating the transcultural and transformational potential of immigrant diasporas, the migrant writing rather seems to reflect Vijay Mishra's observations that "[d]iasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia" (1).[20]

Also, migrants are not the only groups struggling with hybrid confusion and arbitrariness. British migrant fiction equally explores the anxieties a hybridised environment caused within the white native population. In its novels, hybridisation of a society increases native retreats into myths of national or ethnic purity. One look at Gilroy's statement reveals that the intricacy of hybridity is increased by the fact that it has evoked greater amounts of racist anxiety and xenophobia than, in Said's words, the cultural encounter with the colonised (yet mono-cultural) 'Other':

> Today's hatreds and violence arise less than they did in the past from supposedly reliable anthropological knowledge of the identity and difference of the Other. Their novel sources lie in the problem of not being able to locate the Other's difference in the common-sense lexicon of alterity. Different people are still hated and feared but the timely antipathy against them is nothing compared to the hatreds turned towards the greater menace of the half-different and the partially familiar. To have mixed is to have been party to a great betrayal. Any unsettling traces of hybridity must be excised from the tidy, bleached-out zones of impossibly pure culture. (Gilroy 67)

What Gilroy's comment implies is that the mono-cultural 'Other' is discriminated against due to its 'Otherness', which, however, is definite and therefore a predictable projection. Hybridity, on the other hand, is loathed and attacked precisely because it consists of a mix of familiar and unknown elements which result in identities that are strangely familiar and yet 'impure'. British migrant fiction echoes Gilroy's statement by thematising the uncomfortable truth that racism and neo-colonialist thinking have

[20] Mishra speaks of the perception of hyphenated identities in diasporas in Britain.

not vanished in the wake of a new hybridised world. On the contrary, the novels seem to accentuate the fact that the tendency to enforce racial, cultural and national markers to create clear-cut boundaries against intangible hybrid identities appears to accelerate in multicultural Britain. Hybridity, so it seems, aggravates the urge of post-colonial individuals to search for hermetic categories that offer orientation, be that racial purity or ethnic conservatism. Throughout my analysis, I will argue that hybridity in British migrant fiction is portrayed as a state not to be celebrated, but a disorientation to be overcome. What the novels at hand bring to light is an arsenal of strategies such as nationalism or fundamentalist thinking with which individuals are at pains to re-establish categories such as roots, belonging and orientiation.

The novelty of British migrant fiction consists in the genre's focus on inconsistencies of post-colonial concepts; the perspectives presented in this writing re-evaluate or entirely evade post-colonial domains. Also crucial for this genre is the promotion of specific agendas in the novels that represent conceptual antidotes to post-colonial ideas. Two key ideas are significant for my discussion of new horizons in British migrant fiction: humanism and the related concept of universalism. A closer look at these two mindsets and their relationship with the post-colonial will show that universalism and humanism are very much remote from post-colonial discourse. As a matter of fact, post-colonial critics and writers are highly suspicious of humanist approaches and universalist ideas.

2.2 Humanism and Universalism as Counter-Agendas of the Post-Colonial

> I should like to see the word *universal* banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe.
>
> - Chinua Achebe[21]

Achebe's reproach condenses several aspects of post-colonial criticism towards the idea of universalism in post-colonial fiction.[22] He openly boycotts universalism as it seems to promote universal values and human commonalities only on the surface. According to Achebe, universalism in fact represents yet another attempt of the

[21] qtd. in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Griffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practise in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989) 127, emphasis in the original.

[22] Here Achebe speaks of removal of universalism in African literature only, but his critique is symptomatic for the objections post-colonial critics in general hold against the idea of universalism.

Eurocentric West to dominate the art and writing produced in formerly colonised countries. Bearing his sharp opposition in mind, I find it important to explore the idea of what universalism (and humanism, for that matter) actually is. I will outline in the following section that this post-colonial rejection of universal and humanist postulates is based upon a historical clash between the post-colonial and the universal that casts its shadow over recent attempts to acknowledge universalist and humanist positions in contemporary migrant fiction.

Universalism and humanism are two related concepts that can be considered valuable accomplishments of the European Renaissance. According to Kraemer, the idea of shared human features and the perception of a humanity as whole and inseparable are the crucial humanist and universalist features of the Renaissance period (qtd. in Al-Dabbagh 80: 10). Al-Dabbagh draws on Kraemer's perspective by stating that "this all-pervading humanist universalism, this awareness of the unity and common destiny of mankind" was an idea firstly introduced in the philosophical classics of Antiquity and then revived by the Islamic Renaissance four centuries before the European Renaissance appeared on the horizon of European scholarly history (80). Al-Dabbagh's focus on the humanist universalism in Islamic scholarship preceding its expansion into European and Western thinking for centuries throws a new light on humanism and universalism as exclusively Western European concepts (as suggested by post-colonial critics). Those scholars and writers who label universalism and humanism as exclusively European theoretical mindsets often seem to ignore the role of Islamic and Middle Eastern scholarship in the development and promotion of universalist ideas:

> This movement, aptly termed the Renaissance of Islam, was a clear harbinger, and a major force behind the rise, of the European Renaissance. Among the main features of this new humanism, e.g. individualism, secularism, belle-lettrism, and humanist idealism, it is universalism that stands out as path-breaking and reverberating in its influence on subsequent developments in world literature and culture through the period of the European Renaissance and beyond. (Al-Dabbagh 78)

Thus the holistic idea that humanity should be perceived as one with all humans sharing common features and one human destiny was originally the child of many parents: the Antiquity, the Islamic Renaissance and its European successors. Here the question arises whether Chinua Achebe's critique at the beginning of this section is truly directed against this historically pan-cultural movement. What lies behind Achebe's accusation of universalism as a weapon of European neo-imperialism?

The post-colonial understanding of and opposition towards the idea of universalism and one mankind is limited to one particular period in the history of this term, namely the rise of universalist values and ideas in the so-called Commonwealth literature[23] in the aftermath of the British Empire and in the wake of many national movements of independence across its former colonies. Certainly the first conference on Commonwealth literature at the University of Leeds in 1964 can be seen as a starting point to consider universal human themes as shared concerns and visions of the literary fiction produced in the Commonwealth. The initial ambition of this conference was to establish similarities between the writing produced at the political and cultural centre of English literary fiction and the fiction written throughout the Commonwealth. William Walsh and Norman Jeffares are considered the 'founding fathers' of this genre named Commonwealth literature, advocating a set of common aesthetic values valid for writings produced across the then newly conceived post-Empire, pan-national entity of the Commonwealth:

> Just as the idea of a Commonwealth of nations suggested a diverse community with a common set of concerns, Commonwealth literature – whether produced in India, Australia or the Caribbean – was assumed to reach across national borders and deal with universal concerns. Commonwealth literature certainly dealt with national and cultural issues, but the best writing possessed the mysterious power to transcend them too. (McLeod, *Beginning* 13)

What were the universalist criteria that Commonwealth writers ideally implemented in their writings? In general, their novels were supposed to overcome the local provinciality and the context they were written in by thematising universal issues of human condition known to all mankind. The specifics of a region or culture of origin visible in Commonwealth writing were subordinate to the universality of the novel: "National differences were certainly important, adding the novelty of 'personality', 'light' and 'colour'; but ultimately these 'national' specifics were secondary to the fundamental universal meaning of the work" (McLeod, *Beginning* 15).

Both McLeod and Moore-Gilbert point to the aesthetic and political implications of this universalist agenda of Commonwealth literature. McLeod argues that the neglect of local contextualisation in favour of all-encompassing human

[23] Due to its literary focus on the exploration of human condition that transcends national borders, the universalist agenda of Commonwealth literature was also referred to as 'liberal humanism': "For liberal humanists the most 'literary' texts always transcend the provincial contexts of their initial production and deal with moral preoccupations relevant to people of all times and places" (McLeod, *Beginning* 15).

characteristics along with the implementation of universal aesthetic values represents an attempt to impose aesthetic criteria of the English literary canon upon Commonwealth fiction: “Commonwealth literature, then, was really a sub-set of canonical English literature, evaluated in terms derived from the conventional study of English that stressed the values of timelessness and universality” (*Beginning* 14). In other words, the universal validity of aesthetic principles promoted by Commonwealth critics such as Walsh and Jeffares covers a more implicit agenda of this genre: the establishment and promotion of criteria typical for the classics of the English national canon as indicators for 'good' literary writing. However, post-colonial scholars hold more objections against the liberal humanism of Commonwealth literature than its alleged enforcement of aesthetic conformity with the English literary canon. Chinua Achebe, as seen previously, attacks universalist postulates for the political consequences they have on his national (African) literature. Moore-Gilbert reveals that Achebe belongs to the circle of post-colonial and politically highly engaged authors who have highlighted their political engagement from the moment they became involved in writing. Achebe’s concern with emancipation and liberty movements in Africa cut across the grain of Norman Jeffares’ universalist perspective onto Commonwealth writing:

> For Jeffares, material struggles such as the various African liberation and independence movements were by definition only of ‘local’ or temporary interest and were not to be understood as crucial contexts within which the new literatures should be read. He required instead that critical effort be directed primarily to elucidation of the ‘human truths’ mediated by Commonwealth writers and called for the Commonwealth critic to operate by ‘universal’ standards, by which Jeffares in fact meant those which continued to dominate the metropolitan English department at the time. (Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory* 28)

According to Moore-Gilbert, both the writing and the critical reception of Commonwealth literature implicitly erased the idea that local struggles for independence should be interpreted in the context of local history and society. This would clearly lead to the questioning of any power of supranational entities such as the Empire (or the authority of Commonwealth literature for that matter). Achebe’s critique in the epigraph to this section originates from the year 1975; however, little has changed in the post-colonial reception of universalist or humanist postulates since then. Ashcroft and his colleagues state that post-colonial writing still prioritises the portrayal of the disenfranchised margins (41), and clearly dismisses any “assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value

systems" (11). Elaine Childs sharpens this argument by stating that assumptions made upon universalist or humanist premises still have a (neo-)imperialist perspective at their core: "Even if people do have some kind of universal core, in a post-secular, post-globalized, post-postmodern age, it is an act of imperialism to assume, from any position, that someone else's insides are the same as yours" (12).

Despite these post-colonial objections – or perhaps precisely because of them – I will discuss British migrant fiction as a genre that allows for universalist postulates and assumptions about human nature. I am at the same time aware of the difficulties that go hand in hand with universalist premises about what constitutes human nature. The dispute between universalist perspectives in literary writing and the post-colonial focus on marginality and local and national specifics is symptomatic for the conflictual question of what constitutes the human condition and who is to determine it. As Mary Midgley notices, setting up a set of ideas about the nature of mankind often results in propagandistic and biased undertakings. Scholars advocate the universality of their findings on human characteristics only to suppress individuals or groups that are not in accordance with these characteristics. Also, philosophers and intellectuals who want to maintain the social status quo declare its specifics as universal and timeless:

> Thinkers who were fairly well satisfied with that society … expounded ideas of human nature which justified current customs. Since those customs were usually complicated, this approach could produce quite complex theories. But they were always firmly slanted towards acceptance of current hierarchical social arrangements. (Midgley 47)

In other words, as soon as one finds oneself in complete agreement over the specifics of a system or a society, it becomes tempting to declare its universal value in order to maintain or even expand it. However, exploring the human element in British migrant fiction does not result in all-encompassing utopian visions of a humanity in unity and harmony that ignore conflicts between people and cultures, as post-colonial critics have claimed about liberal humanism in Commonwealth literature. What I find objectionable about the post-colonial critique is that it establishes a set of aesthetic rules for writing that, at the end of the day, is as reductionist as the attempt made by Walsh and Jeffares to unify Commonwealth writing under universalist ideas. Both paradigms tell writers what to do and what to neglect. Post-colonial writers should, in any case, refrain from humanist or universalist ideas as they allegedly trivialise conflicts and discrepancies between those in power and those who

are oppressed. Commonwealth writers, as proposed by Walsh and Jeffares, should at all costs attempt to transcend local conflicts and particularities on a higher level where they can explore the transcontextual nature of mankind. In British migrant fiction, universalism and humanism are neither categorically dismissed nor are they an imperative for every migrant novel. Universalist postulates and suppositions about human nature represent one possible option for the novels' agendas. Based upon general premises of unity and kinship as suggested above by Kraemer and Al-Dabbagh (Al-Dabbagh 78; 80), the novels examine parallels between and synchronicities shared by their characters, thus evoking the impression that despite their age, culture and gender differences, the characters hold thoughts, emotions and behaviours in common. Throughout my analysis, I will refer to 'human nature', 'human potential' and the 'human disposition' to highlight the fact that particular human properties are immanent to all characters in the novels, but that they also manifest themselves in various forms.

At this point it is important to ask, what human nature is. As with humour, there is no simple answer to this question; or as Antweiler puts it, any straightforward reply is already inadequate (Antweiler 21). I will try and consider several aspects that need to be taken into account when speaking of human nature or human condition and applying it in my analysis. In his collection of essays *Being Humans* (2000), Neil Roughley lists several parameters that help to clarify what scholars exactly mean when they refer to human nature. One is the distinction between 'description' and 'evaluation'. According to Roughley, "[t]alk of 'human nature' is often either explicitly or implicitly evaluative. … [I]f that is so, we require clarity both as to the descriptive dimensions which support it and as to the modes of transition to the evaluative sphere" (380). The narratives under survey represent an exploration and inventory of human potential by offering portrayals and commentaries on traits of human nature. What they reveal or, in Roughley's words, 'describe', is a panorama of human contradictoriness irrespective of race, culture, gender or age: personal interests, partialities, hypocrisies and inconsistencies with which the characters continually betray themselves or each other. These human inconsistencies are uncovered and described with the help of comic effects. The question of evaluation is more complex as the humorous tone with which the characters are portrayed is prevalently aggressive and derisive but also allows for patches of benevolence and understanding. All characters are ruthlessly unmasked as unreliable and worthy of

scorn; at the same time, they are never entirely demolished but handled with at least minimal sympathy. Thus, the evaluation of the human condition in Syal's, Kureishi's and Smith's novels is double-sided, containing both mockery and understanding of their protagonists.

Roughley continues with a differentiation of properties that constitute 'human nature': "The property in question might be a characteristic *common* to both humans and other animals; it might be a property seen as *specific* to humans or the claim might be that to *x* is in some sense of the *essence* of what it is to be human" (380, emphasis in the original). For the purpose of this analysis, I will dovetail with the notion of human 'essence' or properties that all characters in the novels put on display – beyond gender, age, ethnic or religious differences. All characters without exception are flawed, troubled and at pains to overcome their respective troubles. However, the techniques that they reach for, lead to even greater trouble and irritation. One of the greatest incongruities in all three respective novels is the way the characters deal with "[t]he very incongruity of human life, the impossibility of knowing anything with certainty" (Lewis 26), or in pluralistic spheres of present-day Britain: the uncertainty of belonging, roots and orientation in a pool of concurrent world-views, ideologies and cultures. As my examination will show (and the comic effects will reveal), all characters regress to mindsets that they hold for certain and unquestionable. One of them is racism and glorification of one's own culture, or as Hodgson suggests, "[t]he temptation not only to put one's own land in the center of the map, but one's own people in the center of history, [an idea that] seems to be universal" (in Al-Dabbagh, 89). This applies without exception to representatives of the white British culture as well as immigrant communities and hybrid individuals who seem to float in between. Such universal notion of racism and cultural self-assuredness makes clear binaries such as perpetrator vs. the victim or conviction of a certain group futile.

Roughley also discusses the question of quantification or whether the properties defining human nature truly apply beyond contexts such as gender, race or culture; claims on human nature "tend conversationally to imply that the reason for the transcontextual distribution of the property in question is that humans universally, or at least generally, have a disposition to instantiate it" (381). I find Roughley's aspect of 'transcontextuality' of human traits particularly important, as it is precisely contexts or concepts of race, culture and ethnicity that draw post-colonial

demarcations between the coloniser and the colonised, hegemonial and marginalised, white and non-white, centre and margin, and so forth. *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth*, however, transcend these dichotomies by uncovering parallels that go beyond them. Consequently, if all characters are equally treated as flawed, there is no room for favouritism of one individual over the other, one culture or group over the other. The post-colonial agenda of agency – speaking for the marginalised in an empowering, elevating way or representing them in a preferable light – thus becomes an impossible undertaking.

As I have tried to demonstrate, the idea of human nature as discussed by Roughley deviates starkly from post-colonial postulates. At the same time, it allows for reflective portrayals of humanity in British migrant fiction. The textual architecture of the novels under survey is instrumental in expressing their critique of the post-colonial and in portraying the human condition. Narrative strategies play a vital role here; it is above all the comic impetus in the texts with which human inconsistencies are uncovered and post-colonial concepts and agendas come under fire. The following section sets the foundation for the textual analysis of comic effects in British migrant fiction and how they serve to support two distinct agendas crucial for this genre: critique of the post-colonial and the establishment of new perspectives beyond the post-colonial.

3. Methodology of a Genre: Comic Effects in British Migrant Fiction

Of course, not all the novels in British migrant fiction rely upon comic impulses in their texts. British migrant fiction is not a comic genre *per se*. However, in case the texts contain humorous potential, the challenge lies in examining how the comic effects support the overall agenda of the novel and how they essentially contribute to the fact that the novel can be categorised as migrant fiction and *not* as post-colonial fiction. To begin with, I find it difficult to define *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *White Teeth* as exclusively, and explicitly, comic novels. The attribute ‘comic’ cannot be easily attached to a novel, as one has to keep in mind the form *and* the content of a narrative – and here what is being told and the way it is being textually constructed can drift apart. Comic effects are generated on the textual level of a novel; yet, the ‘text’, as Ermida reminds us, should by all means be kept separate from the second dimension of a narrative, namely the story:

> When we speak of the structure of the narrative text, we should bear in mind that the term 'text' covers only *one* of the dimensions of the narrative (Martin 1986: 107 ff, O'Neill 1994: 19 ff), namely its conception as a finished, written or oral, product. Indeed, *what* is told should not be mistaken for *how* it is told, which means, the 'story' should not be confused with the 'text'. In other words, content and form are distinct facets of the narrative which ought to be distinguished, especially in the case under focus, since humor is the perfect example of the fact that the way one tells a story may jeopardize its comic potential. (Ermida 113 f, emphasis in the original)

What I find important to add is that the way a story is constructed on the textual level can also jeopardise or collide with the seriousness of the events that are being told. This way, comic effects in the text can jar with the sobriety and graveness of what is portrayed in story.

Here I would like to put an emphasis on the interplay between the comic and the serious in a text as I believe that a thorough analysis of comic effects includes reflections upon how they complement or collide with serious components of the narrative. Ermida has already pointed to the juxtaposition between serious plots and a humorous narrative tone. Salvatore Attardo examines the quantity of comic effects in relation to the story being told: for him, narratives are permeated with comic effects in various ways and to various degrees. Jokes, for instance, prioritise the generation and appreciation of the comic, that is why such narratives "are entirely functional to the humorous event" (Attardo 98). Some narratives are "essentially serious but have some degree of humor within them"; and still others are permeated by comic effects to various extent (Attardo 98). In some cases, a comedic story determines the overall comic impression of the narrative and in others the comic potential on the textual level contrasts what would otherwise be perceived as a rather sinister narrative. The latter option appears to apply greatly to the novels of migrant fiction analysed here. The nature of migrant and multicultural experience in the texts is in itself so disrupted and conflicting that it can be considered as a sombre counter-balance to its comic tone. All three novels lay bare a discrepancy between, in Ermida's words, '*what* is being told and *how* it is being told': the comic impulses generated on the textual level have a disturbing effect on the novels' rather sinister events. It is thus safe to argue that these novels do not foreground the comic for the sake of entertainment; the comic permeation of their serious stories is strategic and purposeful. The troubles of childhood in *Anita and Me* for example, are only viewed from a comic perspective because they are viewed in retrospective (Davis 142). In other words, while the 9-year-old Meena undergoes a range of difficulties, the

narrative is pervaded by comic impulses that shape Meena's adult narrative perspective on her childhood miseries. In similar fashion, Susheila Nasta argues that "[t]he artifice of carnival played out in [*The Buddha of Suburbia*] is … not without its serious masks" (193): immigrant traditionalism, forced marriages, Karim's struggles as a young actor and the repression of hybrid individuals with socially determined markers of identity are only some of the conflicts that collide with the comic tone of the novel (Nasta 193). As regards *White Teeth*, Ulrike Tancke points to the "painful underbelly of migration and cultural mixing" (n. pag.) hidden under the comic layer generated by the novel's narrative manoeuvres. Tancke calls this duality 'narrative deception' as the reader is tempted to indulge in the comic tone of the novel and overlook the more serious layers in the events that are portrayed (n. pag.). Similarly, Philip Tew argues that the seriousness of the events in *White Teeth* counters the almost clownish tone of their narrative portrayals and sits uncomfortably with the reader's laughter (53). As these statements illustrate, textual strategies with comic potential do not necessarily make for 'comic novels' where the comic for the sake of the comic is the crucial goal. What can be said about humour in British migrant fiction is that it serves as a strategic device aiming at several purposes within these novels – out of which easy entertainment is, if anything, marginal.

The relationship between comic effects and segments free of comic potential on the textual level is also relevant for the analysis of the comic. Attardo argues that any narrative that is not explicitly a joke consists of humorous and non-humorous components and that a thorough analysis has to include both (29): How do they relate to each other? Is the correlation dominated by contrast or completion? For Attardo, serious passages fulfil three functions for the entire narrative: they are a set up for punchlines, they contribute to the development of the narrative and they represent what he calls 'serious relief':

> "The function of the set up of jokes is quite significant: in order to have incongruity one has to have some background of expectations to violate. The set up fulfills this requirement. The development of the narrative may, in fact, be achieved through humorous means as well, so we are not dealing with a necessary and sufficient condition. Rather, it is a common tendency in humorous narratives to develop the narrative via serious indications of events, etc. and 'add' the humorous events to this fundamentally serious storyline. […] By serious relief (obviously calqued [sic!] on 'comic relief') I mean any stretch of text in an otherwise line-rich context that contains few or no jab lines." (Attardo 89)

According to Attardo, passages of 'serious relief' in an otherwise predominantly comic narrative are often used for 'morals': reflective (and rather sombre) statements or judgements of a situation, the world or humanity in general. They also add to the three-dimensionality of the characters that would have remained rather flat and caricature-like otherwise (Attardo 89). Attardo's idea of 'serious relief' will play a crucial role in the course of my analysis. In narratives that are predominatly comic (as is the case with *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *White Teeth*), passages free of comic potential are rare and outstanding – and therefore strategic in two ways: adding to the depth of a character and contemplating the absurdities of the world and 'human nature'. What I will try and demonstrate is that the interplay between comic and serious passages in these three novels is complementary. Sections free of comic potential contribute to the overall agenda of every novel.

As I have outlined before, one of the agendas is a humanist perspective on the characters, or as Kureshi has put it, "to understand or feel what it is one's own humanity consists in, what it is to be alive, and what it is to see both oneself and others as being ends not means, and as having souls ("The Rainbow Sign" 48 f). Interestingly, critics such as James Wood complain about a *lack* of humanity in *White Teeth*, as the comic tone of the novel turns its characters into cartoonish figures that are permanently ridiculed; Wood even goes as far as to claim that the characters are too funny to be human (169 f). Needless to say that, for Wood, *White Teeth* is a novel that is entirely and purposefully comic. Consequently, he ignores passages that, in Attardo's words, stand for 'serious relief', deeper, more sombre tones and a moral impetus: "Formally, [Smith's] book lacks moral seriousness. But her details are often instantly convincing, both funny and moving. They justify themselves" (176). Wood makes a valid point as an excessive use of comic effects can lead to buffoonish literary portrayals of human beings. At first sight, the texts presented here are inhabited by clown-like, farting grandmother figures, hairy racists with a speech impediment and a range of unfortunate fools who stumble through life. However, the novels' complex textual use of comic effects in synergy with occasional serious passages account for deeper insights into the complexity of all the characters and, at the end of the day, their humanness. However rare they might be, serious passages particularly contribute to the three-dimensionality of the protagonists. One prerequisite is that one has to abandon the rather shrill wittiness of the narrative voices in these novels and analyze the textual level instead. Or as Attardo suggests: "[T]he text itself

becomes the foundation of its own interpretation" (31). Consequently, instead of interpreting the jolliness of the narrative voice as overwhelming or depreciating the humanity within the characters, I will look into the textual constellations and analyze their comic potential (or the lack of it). In doing so, I hope to illustrate that, on a deeper level underneath the narrative scorn, there is a space that allows for complexity, more differentiated portrayals of human beings and at least minimal empathy and understanding for their inconsistencies.

The interplay between the comic and the serious is also important regarding the portrayal of 'human condition' in general. On the one hand, comic effects help to unmask a troubled and inconsistent humanity. On the other hand, in the few, more sober passages, the narrators step back and ponder on human troubles or make generalised statements about the world. These passages represent non-humorous interspaces that contain general thoughts on human folly debunked by comic effects throughout the text.

In the following, I would like to elaborate on the question *who speaks* or the question of the narrative voice in the interplay between the comic effects on the textual level and the events portrayed in a novel. I will also have a closer look at the narrators in the three novels under examination as they all function as mediators of the comic. To begin with, comic effects are constructed on the textual level and communicated to the reader via narratorial remarks, comments or, more general, utterances.[24] *Anita and Me* is narrated with the help of two narrative voices, namely the voice of the main protagonist and child-narrator Meena and her adult alter ego, the grown-up first-person narrator Meena, who looks upon her childhood events in comic retrospective.[25] Karim Amir is the 'fallible' (Morrison 186) first-person narrator and the central character of *The Buddha of* Suburbia, whose narrative voice contains "flamboyant and vulgar rhetoric" (Holmes 647). *White Teeth* depends upon an omniscient narrator who, as I have briefly mentioned above, has received considerable academic critique as a "pyrotechnic storyteller … [whose] narrative voice often [comically] overshadows the characters being described or analysed" (Dawson 153). What all these narrative voices have in common is that they have been identified as instrumental in the comic mode of their novels respectively. Meena

[24] According to Fludernik, the narrator "is the person who utters the words of the story", the words of *what* is being told (*An Introduction* 158).

[25] Campbell-Hall (2009); Davis (1999); Otano (2004).

and Karim as first-person narrators have been considered mouthpieces representing the alleged post-colonial agendas of their novels (Campbell-Hall 291; Carey 125); *White Teeth*'s omniscient narrator has faced major critique from scholars like Wood, who argues that this kind of comic narrative storytelling is highly problematic because "[a]s realism, it is incredible; as satire, it is cartoonish; as a cartoon, it is too realistic … . It is all shiny externality, a caricature" (172). The role of narratorial wittiness or sarcasm in the novels under survey has certainly been discussed in a controversial manner; the narrative voices and their humourous tone overpower sombre events, turn the characters into comic fools and leave the reader no time to reflect. Also, the narrators have been considered as carriers of the comic mode who use their verbal rhetoric to express post-colonial critique and subversion of dominant power discourses.

Here I would like to bring the concept of 'narrative deception' (Tancke n.pag.) into mind, that suggests that the comic narrative tone draws attention away from trauma, loss and lack of belonging in a story. From my perspective, the same applies to the jocular and at times sensationalist narrative voices in *Anita and Me, The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *White Teeth,* that have occupied most critics to the extent that the textual strategies that generate wittiness in these novels have been mostly neglected. However, as Tancke puts it, "we need to disclose these strategies in order to arrive at an adequate appreciation of [the novel's] key concerns" (n.pag.). In my analysis, the text is the breeding ground for comic effects in literary fiction. The narrators simply utter phrases that are comical. My point of departure is therefore the textual analysis of the comic: what words, images, phrases are brought together to create comic tension? The narrators in the novels at hand are taken into consideration as the 'speakers' of the narrative that communicate details of incidents and characters to the reader. In case their portrayals of characters and events contain explicit narratorial comments and evaluations, I will analyze how far the narrators in *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *White Teeth* use comic effects to express dismissal, critique or any other judgement.[26] It is the text, the written architecture of a

[26] Monika Fludernik speaks of 'heterodiegetic' narrators as narrative voices that "foreground their role as narrator function as the producer of the narrative text. . . . . Signals for a heterodiegetic narrator are the use of evaluative expressions (*the poor fisherman*, *the odious fellow*) and of expressive words and phrases such as *To be sure* or *By God!* as well as of metanarrative comments (*Now, let us see what has been happening to poor Henry*)" (*An Introduction* 158). I will look for these signals in the text in order to decide whether the comic depiction of a character or a situation indeed reflects narratorial judgement and how this judgement falls into line with the textual disruption through comic effects.

narrative that allows for comic potential, thus breaking with the anticipation of the reader. It is also the comic effects on the textual level that lend the narrative voices their flamboyance and cheekiness. The narrative voices utter comic remarks or comments in order to position themselves towards the object of their scorn. The creation of humour on the textual level and the narratorial use of scorn, comic dismissal or benevolent sympathy contribute to the overall agendas of the novels.

3.1 The Textual Architecture of Comic Effects

As previously stated, comic effects in texts are not accidentally comic: they are the result of deliberate textual constructions that generate comic tension. A text is comic by design: according to Dieter Berger, the text's 'rhetorical strategies' guide the reader towards the impression that the text is 'funny' (21). This raises the question of the comic nature of a text: when do we speak of comic impulses in texts, when is it appropriate to claim that a text contains humorous potential? What textual constellations are necessary to generate a comic effect?

Traditionally, theorists and philosophers have explored the breeding grounds and conditions necessary to generate humour. In general, the concept of incongruity has found a major echo in the works of several philosophers as *the* fundamental condition for the design of the comic. Immanuel Kant, for instance, argues that comic potential emerges from the incongruous tension between the expectation of an individual and the moment it is violated by something unexpected: "*Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*" (qtd. in Morreall, "Immanuel Kant" 47, emphasis in the original). Kant hereby stresses the moment of surprise and disappointment of preceding anticipations as the crucial impulse for comic experience, that is, the incongruity that arises between an expectation and its unexpected outcome. Arthur Schopenhauer expands the concept of the incongruous by stating that

> [t]he cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. (qtd. in Morreall, "Arthur Schopenhauer" 52)

Schopenhauer's concept of comic incongruity is not so much focussed on the moment of violation of an expectation (as is the case with Kant). Its novelty consists in the disparity between an individual's cognitive conceptualisation of things and events and their actual occurrence in reality (Morreall, "Arthur Schopenhauer" 52).

Schopenhauer argues that, what we perceive as incongruous is a subjective process, as our memories, knowledge, education and world-views determine our perception of the world and thus constitute a rather specific or idiosyncratic cognitive expectation of the same (qtd. in Morreall, "Arthur Schopenhauer" 51). In other words, what is incongruous to one individual may leave another individual entirely indifferent as their cognitive expectations of the world differ. Hence the correct observation made by Lewis and many others that humour is a subjective phenomenon (Lewis xi).

What implications do Kant's and Schopenhauer's philosophical concepts of comic incongruity have when applied to literary fiction? Paul Lewis resorts to their idea of comic incongruities by stating that texts with comic potential are permeated with clashes of images and elements that at first sight seem irreconcilable (8). In addition to the comic potential of disparities incorporated in a text, Ermida points to the element of surprise:

> The idea that humor results from the combination of dissimilar elements and feeds on the consequent surprising effect is an established one. From this perspective, contrast and surprise equal humor. When we find something funny, it is because the sudden perception of an incongruity makes us drop our initially wrong interpretation, and, as if in a game, search for a surprising meaning we had not anticipated. (Ermida 25)

Comic texts operate in exactly that manner: they are full of comic peculiarities, events, characters and utterances that play with the cognitive perception of the reader or turn it on its head. Their textual constellations operate within the realm of unexpected surprise and force the reader to revisit his or her initial interpretation. 'Searching for the surprising meaning' or arriving at new and unpredictable conclusions can be accompanied by amusement on the part of the reader; in this case, the comic disruption resolves in laughter.

Although mismatched disparities serve as key boosters that trigger amusement and laughter in the reader, two aspects need to be kept in mind. Firstly, as Morreall correctly points out, amusement and laughter are not self-evident or imperative responses to incongruities. Unexpected surprises may also indicate a world out of control, thus leading to emotions such as fear and anxiety ("Funny Ha-Ha" 196). Thus, another important factor necessary for the comic experience is an environment of comfort. Relative safety motivates an individual to extend their exposure to comic disparities; under this circumstance, they do not provoke the recipient to improve, understand, overcome or even evade incongruous disparities (Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha" 196). In a similar way, Lewis suggests that in comic texts, "*humor is a playful,*

not a serious, response to the incongruous" (11, emphasis in the original). Presuming that the texts at hand have not been designed (nor perceived) as spine-chillers, horror stories or narratives of Gothic fiction, I conclude that the textual incongruities operating in these novels evoke comic effects. In other words, the incongruities in the novels at hand do not evoke horror but create comic potential that can trigger mirth within the reader.

My second point of consideration is the subjectivity of the incongruous. What individuals perceive as incongruous and therefore potentially comic is almost arbitrary and depends completely upon individual perceptions of the world. Ermida correctly points out that "nothing is inherently laughable, since there are many personal, social, age-related, geographical, and cultural variations affecting possible reactions to the humorous stimuli" (36; see also Lewis 11). I am aware of the fact that not every passage or extract in these novels that contains elements of contrast and surprise will automatically evoke laughter in *every* reader. My analysis is *not* to be read as a catalogue of comic sections that every reader will find funny. Some of the passages may in fact rather cause irritation or leave some readers entirely indifferent. And still, despite the role of subjectivity in the perception of the comic, analysing comic effects in literary texts is a comprehensible and systematic undertaking that can produce consistent and fruitful results. Horn stresses the universality of the 'comic formula': the deviation from the norm, regardless of its cultural or social context or personal preferences will always be the crucial condition for the generation of the comic (Horn 171). In other words, the combination of contrast and surprising abruptness perceived in a relatively comfortable environment remains a 'universal form of the comic' despite its various individual manifestations. Furthermore, Attardo underlines the assistance offered in the text that helps to interpret a passage as comic: "[I]f the text has more or less explicit traces leading to a given interpretation, then that interpretation is more likely to be a viable one for the text" (31). That is to say, textual parameters such as language, situation, or possible targets of the comic attack all help to identify an episode or an utterance as potentially comic. Throughout my analysis, I will therefore use the term 'humorous potential' immanent to a character, utterance or a scene, bearing in mind that comic effects are not universally comic for every reader, but that they contain key elements necessary for creation and appreciation of the comic.

3.2 Comic Effects as Tools of Textual Guidance and Narrative Commentary

Throughout my analysis, comic effects are understood as a tool of textual guidance with which a novel promotes particular standpoints and agendas that go beyond the mere entertainment of the reader. What Dieter Berger suggests in his analysis and what I hold as one of my premises is, that texts contain textual constellations that bear humorous potential. Furthermore, the meaning of the text and the appreciation of its comic signals is disclosed in the act of reading of the text (D. Berger 11 f). Dieter Berger's model on the reading of the comic is based upon Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implicit reader', a reading entity or the act of reading implied by a text (a concept not to be mistaken for the 'real' reader) (Iser 8 f). Put differently, comic effects in a text guide the 'implicit reader' towards the discovery of an agenda that a novel holds in store.

Wolfgang Iser is at pains to point out that this textual guidance does not end in one deterministic interpretation offered to the reader. Rather, it results in a possible spectrum of interpretational options for the reader that are playfully discovered in the process of reading (92). Iser's notion of what novels are supposed to do (and guide the reader toward) is a re-evaluation of 'the old' and the proposition of 'something new'. By the 'old' Iser means contemporary social or historical norms, imperatives or hierarchical structures. The novel does not simply reproduce the empirical reality of the reader, it also questions the validity of this reality along with all the regulatory mechanisms which make this reality allegedly coherent (Iser 8). The task of the 'implicit reader' is to discover what Iser calls the textual 'negation' of the familiar, the regular and the conventional in favour of a new outlook promoted by the text (Iser 8). Both the 'negation' and the re-negotiation of the known and the proposition of an alternative outlook are communicated to the 'implicit reader' via rhetorical strategies in the text. However, Iser argues that these strategies should not 'push' the reader into an unequivocal understanding of the novel's new agenda. The novel's message is "rather a promise" playfully uncovered in the act of reading (Iser 58). Consequently, as regards the quality of the textual strategies that manoeuvre the reading process, Iser states that they can be characterised by complexity and ambiguity, a fact that turns the reading process into an engaging and challenging undertaking (10). Applied to comic effects, one can without fail argue that humour as a textual strategy certainly fulfils this criterion of strategic ambiguity. Or as Ermida puts it,

> [s]ince humor is, as it were, a hide-and-seek game, it is not always easy for the reader to tackle the text: incongruities require solving, but clues are scarce or misleading. This is partly due to the fact that sender and recipient have asymmetrical power: the former holds the key to deciphering the text's meaning, but conceals it and masks it; the recipient, on the other hand, has to search for it and make predictions on the basis of the information given. (Ermida 149)

In the fiction at hand, comic effects represent major stimuli emitted by the text and received by the reader. With contrast and surprise (see e.g. Lewis 11) as the crucial conditions for the creation of comic incongruities, textual strategies generate comic potential by evoking contradictions and provoking wrong interpretations initially held by the reader (Ermida 158). Also, they invert the initial guidance offered by the text; the expectation of the reader initially evoked by the text is then violated by new comic propositions.

What textual constellations create comic incongruities and guide the reader towards the disruption of his or her cognitive anticipations? To clarify how a text generates humorous potential, I will now examine a few strategies crucial for the understanding of humour in the fiction at hand, namely: irony, caricature, grotesque and stereotype.[27]

One way to play with the expectation of the reader is to operate with distortion of a character's personality or outer appearance commonly known as caricature. The known and the expected form or appearance is thereby deformed by exaggeration and thus amplified in the perception of the recipient. What a caricature spots and brings to light are prominent imperfections in and about an individual (Bergson 12); the textual exaggeration of these flaws is a technique that causes comic deviation from the familiar and the known and foregrounds the character's deficiencies.

A related concept to caricature is that of the grotesque, as it also plays with the visual imagination (and expectation) of the reader. The grotesque has perhaps best been explained in Michail Bachtin's study on the medieval carnival. According to him, the visual conventions on the 'rightness' of the world are strongly violated by grotesque figures and fantastic imagery that demolish the proportions and shapes proving the world's coherence. This way, the familiar and the known is relativised (Bachtin 85). A grotesque body, for instance, is inasmuch incongruous as it is always

[27] These examples are frequently encountered in the novels under survey. However, they are only a part of the palette of strategies with comic potential operating in these texts.

twofold: it consists of two colliding parts or entities[28] (Bachtin 363). What is also important about the grotesque is its function in a novel. The grotesque image always distorts the known and the familiar by spotlighting "the inconsistent and ambiguous fullness of life" (Bachtin 113). On that account, it is impossible to use the grotesque in order to establish new conventions of morality or to support any abstract concepts. The core of the grotesque is fluidity and volatility which make unequivocal axioms about life futile (Bachtin 113). What my analysis will reveal is that the reception of the novels under spotlight has delivered rather one-sided readings of the textual impulses of the grotesque. In my examination, I want to shed a different light on the way the grotesque has been interpreted in this fiction.

One of *the* classic textual and rhetoric strategies evoking humorous potential is irony; ironic remarks permeate all three novels under examination. As a textual strategy, irony is complex and rather demanding for the reader; the guidance of the reading act (see Iser 1972) is complicated as ironic remark[s] "convey … the opposite of what is said" (Ermida 12). Ermida puts an emphasis on the subtleness of irony by stating that it is an attack in disguise "through which the speaker can conceal his true thoughts while belittling his hearer" (12). Again, it is up to Iser's 'implicit reader' to arrive at the right inference only subtly suggested in the text, a fact that only confirms the complexity and ambiguity of the comic as a strategy of textual guidance.

Some facets of the comic such as irony are subtle, others are highly controversial, as is the case with the textual design of comic stereotypes. In general, a stereotype can be considered as a "highly generalized idea, situation, or character, derived from an oversimplified treatment in a work. More commonly, it refers to the reliance on generalizations about racial, national, or sexual groups in the depiction of certain characters" (Quinn 309). Stereotype humour, then, targets particularities stereo-typical for a particular group. In her analysis of *White Teeth*, Squires decries simplified world-views promoted by comic stereotypes, as the characters targeted by this kind of humour appear too one-dimensional (67). Apart from the 'cheapness' and flatness of stereotype humour, some critics object to possible political implications behind oversimplified jokes on ethnicity, sex or age. Morreall, for instance, dismisses sexist and racist jokes "because they amuse only people who share their assumptions,

[28] Most traditionally, grotesque was a mixture of the human, the animalistic and the plant-like; it signified the hybridity and incompleteness of body and form (Bachtin 82 f).

and those assumptions are not merely false but morally harmful inasmuch as they perpetuate false stereotypes and so unjust treatment of the target group" ("Philosophy and Religion" 239). On closer inspection, Morreall attacks the lack of morality and political correctness behind stereotype humour, but he also presumes that all stereotypes are in essence false inventions whose continuation via racist or ethnic jokes harms targeted groups or individuals. In contrast, Christie Davies, who has surveyed ethnic humour around the world, impeaches the negative practical consequences behind the use of ethnic or stereotype humour:

> [J]okes provide insights into how societies work – they are not social thermostats regulating and shaping human behavior, but they are social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on. To become angry … about jokes and to seek to censor … them because they impinge on sensitive issues is about as sensible as smashing a thermometer because it reveals how hot it is. (Davies 9)

As Davies suggests, ethnic or stereotype humour is indicative of generalizations made about certain groups in a society, but it does *not* sharpen conflicts or serve as an initial boost for outright hostility and violence against the targeted groups. According to Davies, humour as a phenomenon is far too unreliable and ambiguous to be used as a systematic weapon to aggravate antagonisms of any sort (8). My position on the use of stereotype humour in migrant fiction dovetails with Davies' argument. I do not intend to discuss the appropriateness of comic stereotypes (or the appropriateness of any other comic effect for that matter) or debate whether or not they enhance stereotypical perceptions of ethnicity. For the purpose of my analysis, stereotype humour is as much a textual strategy as any other strategy; I also argue that in the novels at hand, it goes beyond simple entertainment of recognising familiar images of the ethnic and the foreign. As Mühleisen points out in her analysis on funny accents, a great deal of comic potential in narratives derives from uncovering stereotypes. She argues that comic genres rarely rely upon "truly realistic characters but always stand for something (someone) in a more general sense" (Mühleisen 234). Thus, the characters are conceived as carriers of generalised and traditional behaviour and thinking; what is truly under attack are the conceptualisations of ethnicity and identity *behind* the characters. Or as Rappoport puts it,

> [t]he study of stereotype humor, therefore, is not merely about jokes targeting minorities, or minorities responding with jokes of their own about majorities. It … has a great deal to do with the ways people in these groups adapt to their environments, cope with stress, and seek to define themselves by derogating others. (2)

In my approach to comic stereotypes, I will not judge the (lack of) suitability of the textual engenderment of stereotype humour; rather, I will focus on the question of *who* and *what* is being targeted by the comic effects in the text and for what purpose.

As one can see from these examples, what Wolfgang Iser expects from a novel, namely textual and strategic guidance of the implicit reader, is a rather complex undertaking when comic effects are involved. Humour itself is a multi-directional device of communication that may express sympathy, dismissal, and a whole range of positions and moods in between – a difficult task for the 'implicit reader' to make sense of the comic signals offered in the text. Not even traditional humour research and theory has been able cover all facets of humour as a phenomenon of communication. Ermida correctly states that none of the hitherto proposed theoretical models on the functions of humour has been able to capture the humorous momentum in all its variations and forms (14). Drawing from Victor Raskin's ideas, Ermida concludes that, in place of one singular humour theory, a synthesis of all the characteristics that constitute humour and its functions would be the most viable approach to its complexity (14).

Humour appreciation on the part of the 'implicit reader' consists in more than perceiving textual patterns with comic potential and, as I have said before, the textual impetus of the comic does not guide the reader only towards a feeling of amusement. It takes a broader look into what comic effects as a technique can perform and achieve in promoting narrative agendas. The theoretical grid on a variety of functions of humour that I want to introduce is not to be understood as *the* general meta-theory on humour (a theory scholars have not been able to agree upon for centuries). Rather, this theoretical construct is an attempt to synthesise various branches of humour theory. As such, it serves as a navigational tool for my analysis of comic effects in literary fiction. The structural groundwork of the concept, namely the four general categories of humour, stems from a psychological survey on individual humour styles that Martin et al. have conducted in 2003. These four categories are filled with assumptions on the nature of humour originating from traditional and more recent humour theory. They are divided into sections on emotions and attitudes expressed

with humour. On the one end of the scale, humour can serve as an instrument to create and share feelings of sympathy, benevolence and enhancement of self and others. Martin et al. speak of affiliative humour as a well-disposed means of interpersonal communication and "an essentially non-hostile, tolerant use of humor that is affirming of self and others and presumably enhances interpersonal cohesiveness and attraction" (53). On the textual level, this type of humour signalises benevolence towards the object that is being portrayed. It creates empathy between individuals and parties and contributes to the cohesion of a relationship without harming others. Similarly, humour can also serve to enhance the self ('self-enhancing humour') and thus becomes a constructive tool for an individual to elevate his or her status in a troubling environment. According to Martin et al., self-enhancing humour "is most consistent with the Freudian definition of humor, in the narrow sense, as a healthy defense mechanism that allows one to avoid negative emotions while maintaining a realistic perspective on a potentially aversive situation (Freud, 1928)" (Martin et al. 53 f). Freud speaks of the grandness of humour with which an individual detaches himself from the turmoil of the world and rises above a painful reality. With the help of humour the individual 'I' is able to maintain a triumphant self (254). At the other end of the spectrum on what humour can express as a means of communication lies aggressiveness, hostility and deprecation. Martin et al. state that 'aggressive humour' is generated particularly with the help of sarcasm, mockery, and disparagement "without regard for its potential impact on others (e.g., sexist or racist humor), and it includes compulsive expressions of humor in which one finds it difficult to resist the impulse to say funny things that are likely to hurt or alienate others" (Martin et al. 54). The curious thing about humour is that the emotional and self-elevating detachment caused by a humorous outlook onto a problematic world is the same emotional detachment from other individuals which, according to Bergson, is required to mock and ridicule other people: "[T]he comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (4). In other words, the emotional separation that emerges from the comic perspective helps to overcome anxieties of the world. However, this emotional separation also helps to detach oneself emotionally from the target of one's derision. Aggressive humour stands for emotional distance, and it also stands for critique, as Bergson states that "[l]aughter is, above all, a corrective" (82). The last category of this theoretical concept is called 'self-deprecating humour'. According to Martin et al., this type of humour is directed against oneself:

individuals then attempt to amuse others and catch their attention by turning themselves into the 'butt' of a joke (54). What Martin et al. are at pains to point out is that the lines between these four categories are blurred; aggressive humour may serve to deprecate others and enhance the self at the same time, while affiliative interpersonal humour also emerges from teasing which in itself has slightly aggressive tendencies (Martin et al. 53).

While comic effects are generated on the textual level, they are integral to the comic tone of the narrative entity in every novel. The narrative voice utters comic remarks and observations, commenting thereby on a character, an event or a circumstance. It is on the level of the narrator that the multifacetedness of humour as suggested by Martin et al. comes into effect; the narrator can mock, dismiss, or empathise with the object of her observations. In the case of the novels at hand, the narrators serve as observers, witnesses and commentators on the events in the narrative, treating their objects of observation with at times aggressive, benevolent or deprecating humour and thus constituting another piece in the picture of the novels' overall concern.

As Iser reminds us, a novel is supposed to abandon the habitual, normative and the familiar and introduce new perspectives. This shift from 'the old' towards 'the new' is accomplished through textual guidance and narrative comments which animate the 'implicit reader' to discover this shift and reach for new interpretations and concepts offered by the narrative (Iser 57). In the novels under examination, this shift from the 'old' towards the 'new' is induced with the help of comic effects: the novels re-evaluate post-colonial ideas and concerns by exposing them to narratorial scorn and comic dissection on the textual level with strategies such as irony or the grotesque. On the other hand, the comic tone also assists the narratives in offering perspectives that capture the 'human side' in spheres of cultural contact. In the following section, I will discuss the connection between the comic and human while exploring how comic effects can help to promote universal(-ist) and the human(-ist) postulates. In other words: how does humour serve to deride traits that all humans share? How does it operate as a tool of textual commentary on human inconsistencies?

Scholars such as Michail Bachtin and Henri Bergson have committed to these questions in their studies respectively. Bachtin focuses on the all-encompassing carnivalesque mockery of the world while Bergson concentrates on the nature of

ludicrous human features and characteristics. In very simple terms, medieval carnivals and festivities are considered periods of folkish folly and celebration of buffoonery in which, according to Bachtin, established systems of hegemony and world order are turned upside down. The ludicrous of the carnival represents a counter-cult to the seriousness and formality of the clergy and the official state (Bachtin 53). Naturally, Bachtin's concept of the carnivalesque has found substantial approval within the post-colonial discourse since his idea of the comic and the ludicrous has mostly been interpreted as a liberating force against established hierarchies. From the post-colonial perspective, the spirit of carnival is mainly a spirit of anarchy, subversion and destabilisation of the established order, which is an interpretation that serves the counter-agenda of post-colonial fiction against (neo-) imperialism and any sort of colonial oppression. However, some critics such as Michael Ross have expressed their objections towards several aspects of the Bachtinian carnival. In *Race and Riots*, Ross finds following faults with Bachtin's alleged misconception of the carnivalesque:

> In works of comic fiction, carnivalesque laughter has recurrently been directed against 'those who ‹don't belong,›' a rhetorical strategy not envisioned by Bakhtin in his famous discussion of Rabelais. A term for such writing might be *hegemonic comedy*, for it engenders a type of unBakhtinian laughter - a 'laughing down' - more apt to cement than to disturb the hierarchical lineaments of the entrenched social order. . . . . Such comedy tends to construe the folk-unruliness of carnival, which Bakhtin deemed healthy and progressive, as potentially dangerous *misrule*, a lack of 'civilized' order requiring correction. (5, emphasis in the original)

In this sense, Bachtinian laughter and carnival is only appropriate when it is directed against the rulers of the medieval society; carnivalesque derision of the weak, the foreign, or the poor is a phenomenon allegedly not conceived by Bachtin. According to Ross, Bachtin's agenda is then not to subvert the established order but to strengthen it with 'put-down' disparagement of those on the backside of advantage.

In the following, I will re-consider Ross' statement and interpretation of the Bachtinian theory. Ross points to the political power of subversion arising from the rebellious spirit of carnival; this is certainly true, if we take into consideration the carnivalesque rule of clownishness and buoyancy which clearly opposes the severity of feudalism and clerical institutions. According to Bachtin, the clerical authority in the Middle Ages was surrounded and nurtured by an aura of an "icy, fossilised seriousness" which was founded upon an ideology of asceticism, sin, pain and penitence, while the feudal state oppressed and intimidated its people (123, my

translation). The carnival represented a period of celebratory dissolution of the seriousness of these hierarchies; it forced open norms, privileges, censorship and taboos and as such, it developed not only the spirit of liberation from the old, but also a dynamics of renewal (Bachtin 58). Despite the subversive nature of the carnival *against* the medieval establishment, Bachtin is at pains to emphasise that the carnival is not simply its nihilism and complete degradation; the true essence of carnival is the triumph of the people in their comic renewal and their cheerful perspective on the world (337 f). Moreover, the carnivalesque laughter does not serve to establish counter-moralities and abstract ideas. Rather, it has a carefree and joyful view of the world (Bachtin 304). As such, it is not political, nor is it exclusively satirical,[29] but ambivalent, that is, both joyful and opposing (Bachtin 282). Bearing this in mind, I conclude that, from the post-colonial perspective, the subversive aspect of the carnival has been over-emphasised (and eagerly applied to the novels at hand). Also, Ross' objection against the ruthlessness of the carnivalesque that does not spare the poor and the disadvantaged in the medieval hierarchy, seems to ignore *the* crucial nature of Bachtinian carnival:

> The carnival does not distinguish between actors and the audience. It does not know any boundaries, not even in their most rudiment forms. Boundaries would destroy the carnival . . . . You do not look at the carnival, you *live* it, *everyone* lives it, as it by nature *common to all its people*. . . . . The carnival has a universal character, it is a state of the whole world, its rebirth and renewal that everyone joins. (Bachtin 55, emphasis in the original, my translation).

Indeed, as Bachtin suggests, the carnival is a state of collective mockery and collective laughter. It is insofar universal as it does not spare anyone; the society, the world and even the participants of the carnival are equally ridiculed. Also, the laughter of the carnival is not just a 'put-down' derision of the target. Rather, it is joyful and scornful at the same time (Bachtin 60 f).

Bearing Bachtin's ideas in mind, I argue that the universality and ambivalence of the Bachtinian carnivalesque is vital for the analysis at hand. It does not only revise the hitherto made post-colonial assumptions on Bachtin's concept of laughter operating in migrant fiction, it opens up a new perspective for universality in this

[29] A satire is a genre that uses comic effects in order to degrade and attack the status quo manifested in flawed societies, institutions and individuals. Murfin and Ray claim that it has a moral agenda and aims at social or institutional reforms ("Satire", qtd. in Murfin and Ray 357). One of the classic satires is for instance, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as a comic attack against totalitarian regimes ("Satire", qtd. in Quinn 291).

genre. The ambivalent nature of the carnivalesque impedes easy and clear-cut boundaries between those who laugh and those who are laughed at. The comic attacks of the carnivalesque are not exclusively oppositional and negative, they also have cheerfulness and renewal at their core – a balance I intend to examine in the migrant fiction. The comic mode as understood by Bachtin and applied in my examination allows for a universalist – albeit sneering and buffoonish – view of the world and mankind at large.

Complementary to this rather macroscopic dimension of humour, comic effects in British migrant fiction aim at what specifically constitutes human beings, namely the incongruous and inconsistent in human nature. According to Henri Bergson, the creation and appreciation of the comic experience is only possible with human recipients who observe something human or human-like in their environment:

> [T]he comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. . . . . Several [philosophers] have defined man as 'an animal which laughs.' They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to. (Bergson 3, emphasis in the original)

In other words, the comic domain would not exist without the participation of the human(-like) element both as the observer and as the object and target of the comic perspective. In literature, comic narratives invite the reader to dwell on human vice "to such a degree of intimacy with it, that in the end we get hold of some of the strings of the marionette with which he is playing" (Bergson 8 f). Bergson explains that the comic pleasure of the reader and the audience derives from the guidance of the play or the novel towards the comic investigation in human folly (8 f)[30]. In this case, the text navigates the reader (see Iser 1972) towards a focus on human nature in which human weaknesses are ridiculed. Before we consider what is funny and preposterous about human nature, it is important to conceive the ideal human being and the norm of human behaviour and thought that Bergson considers violated by human beings – a fact that makes them worthy of ridicule. The concepts of 'tension' and 'elasticity' are crucial for human behaviour and survival in life:

[30] Bergson builds his theory on laughter on examples from world classics of comic literature and drama such as Molière's *Tartuffe* or Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

> What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. TENSION and ELASTICITY are two forces, mutually complementary, which life brings into play. (9, emphasis in the original)

An 'elastic' and pliable mind, attitude and behaviour are requisites with which a human being masters the demands of life. András Horn amplifies the conditions under which human beings should prove their mental flexibility; despite all the daily routine and social conventions, the quality of life consists in its uniqueness and novelty of situations. A human being has to develop new and appropriate means to accomplish these situations successfully while stiffness and rigidness of mind counters the dynamic course of life (Horn 110). An individual failing in this undertaking to tackle life with a portion of improvisation and readiness to adapt represents a target for comic derision. According to Bergson, "[t]he laughable element … [always] consists of a certain MECHANICAL INELASTICITY, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being" (6, emphasis in the original). Sticking to the rigid and the well-known is "habitual, simple, childish contrivance" (Bergson 33) that always bears comic potential.

If inelasticity of mind and character is the broad precondition for the ridiculousness of a human being, what specific traits of human nature are then considered absurd and worthy of derision? Bergson speaks of imitation as one crucial aspect of humanness that is at odds with the vivacity of life. Imitation as a concept is twofold: one the one hand, those individuals who imitate gestures and ways of thinking instead of developing their own techniques to adapt are a welcome target for scorn. On the other hand, characters who repeat themselves over and over again and literally become imitations of themselves are equally incongruous with the human ideal of elasticity (Bergson 15). Another laughable aspect of human nature is absentmindedness and lack of self-awareness. According to Bergson, a character is particularly comic in case s/he lacks self-consciousness and knowledge of one's own deficiencies (9). Consequently, the lack of awareness of one's own incongruities and inconsistencies in life forecloses comic self-reflection and a humorous outlook on the world in general.

It is noteworthy that Bergson understands comic derision as an instrument of social sanction with which all those who fail to comply the dynamics of life and

society with an elastic attitude are punished. Laughter then becomes “a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events” (Bergson 37 f). From this perspective, humour bears the stamp of aggressiveness and social exclusion of individuals incapable of dynamic acclimatisation. As I have noted before, the notion of universalist and carnivalesque laughter at the world plays an important role in my examination. Combined with Bergson’s derision of human folly, the comic mode is understood as a textual instrument of exposing and attacking flaws of humanity. At the same time, it is universal and all-embracing, that is, it leaves no room for human impeccability that could be idealised and saved from comic derision. Humour, from the humanist perspective, has an eye on the comic incongruities of human beings; but, being also universal, it exposes them in the whole mankind, thus crossing the demarcations of race and culture. My analysis of comic effects in the novels of British migrant fiction is based upon the premise that the comic impulses are offered by the texts to guide the reader towards the following discoveries as suggested by Iser (1972): the re-evaluation of 'old' normatives and systems of thought, and the realisation of new agendas in the novels. In this particular case, comic effects serve to re-assess parameters of the post-colonial paradigm and, simultaneously, to promote universalist and humanist perspectives on Britain’s plurality of cultures.

III Comic Effects in British Migrant Fiction: Textual Analysis

1. Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*

Anita and Me is a coming-of-age novel written in 1996 by the British comedian and writer Meera Syal. As Syal's first novel, *Anita and Me* contains many auto-biographical elements (Roy 26) as a portrayal of a childhood in the West Midlands in the fictional mining village of Tollington. London's metropolitan pop-culture of the late 1960s has only started reaching the remote industrial province with its music, fashion and TV shows, but so have racist thinking and racist attacks against immigrant communities, fuelled by Enoch Powell and the far-right movement. The heroine of the story, 9-year-old Meena Kumar, is a misfit of her own. At home, she openly rebels against the traditions of her Indian parents by turning into a local tomboy and a Birmingham 'chick'. Outside the parental home, Meena desperately wants to belong to a backyard bunch of infant rebels commanded by Anita Rutter, a feisty and dreaded adolescent. Meena's childhood is dominated by conflicts between individual dreams and communal expectations as well as belonging and marginality. The story is narrated in retrospective by Meena herself as a grown-up first-person narrator who portrays her childhood struggles with a striking dose of humour. Having experienced loss, pain and the desire of wanting to belong, Meena finally finds her place in the world by leaving Anita Rutter and Tollington behind for a better school education.

Anita and Me has been received as a prevalently comic novel, but what precisely is the purpose of its humour? Critics such as Rainer Emig give weight to the novel's entertaining potential: by showcasing ethnic clichés and adjusting them to the taste of a wide readership, novels such as *Anita and Me* are widely accepted and celebrated in the public. Consequently, the comic mode in Meera Syal's novel makes entertainment an end in itself, representing a "trend towards 'acceptable' and marketable ways of portraying alterity" in Britain (Emig 169). At the same time, social critique and textual testimony against injustice towards immigrants are watered down. Emig moreover observes that Asian-British humour (as in *Anita and Me*) falls prey to imitating the entertaining quality of "the hegemonic media culture of globalised and largely U.S.-American formats, characters, and clichés" (187). In summary, *Anita and Me* is considered a comic novel that lacks critical sharpness and relies upon comedy formats rooted in what is now a global and unavoidable US-

entertainment culture (Emig 169). However, as Ermida reminds us, the comic tone of the text does not postulate an essentially 'funny' story; it is a strategic device of portrayal with which even sinister events can be tackled (114). Accordingly, Flint adds that the impression of comic cheerfulness in *Anita and Me* is intentionally misleading the reader: under the novel's seemingly carefree tone lies a serious layer of childhood turmoil including an over-protective and dominating family, a new sibling, an ambivalent friendship and the loss of innocence through Meena's awareness of racist undercurrents in what she considered was her idyllic childhood village of Tollington (Flint 42). As with the other novels of British migrant fiction at hand, comic effects in *Anita and Me* are rarely a purpose in itself but a textual method of portraying childhood anxieties and crises of living between two different cultures. I will furthermore argue that, via comic effects, post-colonial matters such 'oppositionality', 'referentiality' (Ball 2) and promotion of hybridity are newly negotiated on the textual level. What the following examples will show, is that *Anita and Me* sheds a new light on typically post-colonial concerns. The dual sense of humour in the novel ('aggressive' and 'affiliative' (Martin et al. 2003)) allows for a critical treatment of heritage, culture and belonging.

1.1 Racism in Tollington: Manifestations of a Human Phenomenon

In the fictional working-class village of Tollington, racism is an ever-present phenomenon. Campbell-Hall argues that in this "inherently racist corner of 1960s Britain", "any visible signifiers of class/race/educational differences are likely to prohibit the seamless integration of an Indian immigrant family into the pre-existing social fabric" (294). Many times in the novel, the girl Meena encounters hidden racist tendencies in her community. Mergenthal delivers a detailed list of racist motifs, characters and thinking in Tollington unveiled in Meena's satirical descriptions of these encounters: pet names of dogs, hospital staff, the media, girls' journals, schoolbooks and people of the Tollington community themselves all display latent and overt forms of racism (Mergenthal 74 f). Meena's frequent experiences with discrimination towards others and herself give rise to the conclusion of critics that *Anita and Me* in fact captures the radical refusal of racism as a critique immanent to post-colonial writing. Ruvani Ranasinha, for instance, stresses that Meera Syal is a writer willing to take up strong and unequivocal political positions against social oppressions such as racism with her anti-racist and "politically nuanced and

engaged" (247) aesthetics and deconstruction of biased portrayals of ethnicity and Britain's superior nationhood (248). According to Davis, the novel actively dismantles racist and orientalist mindsets in the consciousness of the Tollington community by subverting traditional myths of Britishness such as the image of the noble English gentleman (139). Finally, Graeme Dunphy concludes that due to the novel's critical thematisation of racist thinking and violence, *Anita and Me* can be categorised as post-colonial writing (644).

Upon closer inspection, however, *Anita and Me* refrains from simplified finger-pointing at racism as an entirely 'white' phenomenon directed against Indian immigrants. Mergenthal suggests that the novel's anti-racist agenda does not consist in blunt accusations and unreflected dismissal. Syal depicts occasions of unjustified suspicion against racist thinking and she also manages to shed light on the causes of racism (75). In other words, not every white character is racist, but in case they are, they are racist for a reason. Sam, the leader of a young skinhead group, is portrayed as a frustrated teenager on the downside of social and economic advancement; Mr Turvey, a character at first very much despised by Meena, emerges as fluent in Punjabi and dismissive of the politics of the Empire enforced in the colonised India (Mergenthal 75). Mr Topsy exemplifies the fact that Meena errs when she winds xenophobia everywhere; she is proven to be wrong on a couple of occasions. As many examples in my examination will show, *Anita and Me* is not satisfied with post-colonial 'oppositionality' alone. Racism is not simply a category to be opposed; it is a human trait attached to Meena's friends, relatives, neighbours, co-students and strangers. The novel may comically uncover and attack xenophobia and violence when it occurs, but it also thematises aspects of human psyche operating behind fears of the unknown while at the same time exploring social conditions that trigger and aggravate racial anxieties.

As I have stated before, post-colonial critics tend to tackle racism and xenophobia as an entirely 'white' affair only to be found in the white cultural mainstream. However, in *Anita and Me*, the English are not the only characters prone to racial and ethnic hostility. Meena's somewhat naive narrative observations chronicle contempt for and disparagement of the English in the Indian community: name-calling, abhorrence for the English way of life and a feeling of class and education superiority over the working-class Tollingtoners pervade her parents' and relatives' attitudes towards the English community. What is more, the child-narrator

uncovers resentment towards the 'Other' even within herself. Her discovery reveals that, in the mining village of Tollington, no character is insusceptible to ethnic hostility or racial resentments. Comic effects play a vital and versatile role in the narrative treatment of racial paranoia; they bring to light subliminal hatred and suspicion of the 'Other' and tackle open racism and violence in the novel.

Far from the urbanity of metropolitan areas such as London or even Birmingham, the inhabitants of the mining village of Tollington lead somewhat isolated and desolate lives. As the major turbulences of the 1960s set in, Tollington is indeed 'in turmoil' (*Anita* 143); the mines have been shut down leaving an entire community on welfare drip-feed and poorly paid jobs. To complete the misery of Tollington's residents, the village is overrun by a new motorway. The first wave of immigrants from the Commonwealth has already reached Britain; racism is on its rise, ignited by right-wing politicians such as Enoch Powell. In such an environment, the 9-year-old Meena observes the emerging anxieties and the resonance of Powell's *Rivers of Blood* speech[31] within her Indian community:

> Once, after I had heard papa and the Uncles getting very angry over someone they referred to as 'That Powell Bastard with his bloody rivers' and had added, 'If he wants to send us back, let him come and damn well try!' I had asked mama if the cases were ready and packed in case we had to escape back to India at short notice. (*Anita* 267)

Meena's child-like perspective on adult comments about Enoch Powell is a prime example of comic tension between adult severity and a child's innocence. In this case, the conclusions of the main protagonist even sharpen the worries of the Indian community as Meena contemplates a quick escape to India to evade racial turmoil. Meena's exaggerated verbatim vision of running away from Enoch Powell bears comic potential for its artlessness. Yet, via this exaggerated image, the text tackles and aggravates immigrant anxieties. In her imagination, the 9-year-old often takes adult conversations literally; Meena's misapprehensions of grown-up affairs lead to conclusions that are both comic and innocent at the same time. According to Dunphy, the comic potential in *Anita and Me* often results from Meena's worldly innocence in the face of xenophobia while the adults (and the reader) grasp the severity of what

[31] Stein outlines the key statements of the speech and Enoch Powell's views in general: "In his notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech of April 1968, Enoch Powell voiced his opinion that while black immigrants might receive or have British citizenship they would never 'truly' become British, let alone English" (8). 'Englishness' is thus equated with 'whiteness', a racist notion containing exclusivity and national purity.

Meena fails to apprehend (653). In this case, the child's verbal understanding of Powell's agenda and her relatives' rage pinpoints precisely what xenophobes demand and what the text invokes: the repatriation of immigrants to their countries of origin. As this example also shows, Enoch Powell's ideas have hit the Midlands from the outside and found a fertile ground with Tollington's notorious suspicion of foreigners. It would therefore be too simplistic to argue that Powellism has infested an otherwise entirely tolerant village community. Nonethless, it has certainly given voice to already existing local fears and fuelled the assumption that the 'Other' and the unknown are to blame for the residents' misery.

Meena's experiences with racial hatred and discrimination are manifold and multifaceted. Her friends, neighbours and teachers are all suspicious of the unknown to various degrees. In many cases, Meena is at pains to come to terms with the fact that racism operates in her immediate vicinity, being displayed by people to whom she has grown accustomed. Racist strangers, however, evoke feelings of complete helplessness and painful bewilderment. Witnessing rising animosities against foreigners in Tollington, Meena attempts to analyse and apprehend the motives behind racist behaviour. Yet, it is with strangers that the child stands in awe of the incomprehensibility of racial hatred. One such example of irrational xenophobia is an incident set in a traffic mishap Meena experiences with her mother. Driving uphill on their way to Birmingham, Meena's mother, a novice driver, cannot prevent their car from rolling back. Meena has to get out of the car in order to ask all the drivers behind to make way:

> The truck drivers, the taxi drivers, the fat men squeezed into small cars and the thin women rattling around in hatchbacks, all wore the same weary amused expression, as if my mother's driving had only confirmed some secret, long-held opinion of how people like us were coping with the complexities of the modern world. Putting the car into reverse was, for them, an act of benevolence, maybe their first, as well-intentioned as any of Mr Ormerod's charity parcels to the poor children in Africa. (*Anita* 96 f)

Meena passes an entire parade of drivers who, though mildly amused, decide to roll back out of sympathy with an 'unquestionably overwhelmed' Indian woman. Their amusement, however, is based upon a racist premise: Mrs Kumar's driving skills seem to ratify their belief that immigrants hardly cope with Western technological progress in everyday life. In a sense, the English drivers constitute a laughing community sharing an unspoken ethnic joke, namely that of immigrant backwardness and, in Christie Davies' words, 'stupidity':

> Stupidity … has come to include and to refer particularly to an inability to understand and cope with those technical aspects of the modern world that are common to most countries rather than simply to a lack of understanding of local customs, practices, or forms of speech. (Davies 15)

Despite the fact that Meena possesses proficient English skills and knowledge of the local accent, she and her mother nevertheless fulfil that category of the 'stupid' backward immigrant (an aspect that will become even more obvious later in the scene). The amusement of the drivers is followed by what they consider an act of generosity towards Meena and her mother; possible hostilities are thus channelled into altruism. The narrator comments on their behaviour with irony ('helping *us* as well-intentioned as helping poor children in Africa'), thus uncovering the fact that the charitableness of the drivers covers their assumption of the weak and incompetent immigrant requiring benevolent assistance.

The episode closes with a rather disturbing, if not ugly ending. By the end of the line, Meena is confident that she has been able to convince and charm all the drivers to make way when she has a significant encounter with a sweet-faced elderly lady:

> … I tapped on the window and the old dear slowly rolled it down. 'Sorry, but me mum's at the top of the hill and she's rolling down, ar...can yow move back just a bit. Ta.' She blinked once and fumbled with the gear stick and said casually, 'Bloody stupid wog. Stupid woggy wog. Stupid.' (*Anita* 97)

At this insult, the child literally recoils from the car as if being hit by a fist. The elderly woman – initially an 'old dear' in Meena's eyes – emerges as an outright racist whose attitude results in verbal assault and not in altruistic benevolence. Meena, on the other hand, has attempted to charm people as a local girl only to find out that, despite her rather accomplished performance as a witty Tollington local, her accent cannot protect her from the hostility aimed at the colour of her skin (Otano 224). Certainly, it is difficult to diagnose this passage as entirely comic, bearing in mind that on Meena's return to Tollington that day, she senses that her father has experienced endless similar encounters and animosities (*Anita* 98). What stands out in this scene is the contradiction between the outer sweetness of an elderly lady and the brutality of her verbal abuse. Meena's expectation of the woman's softness and generosity is almost violently crushed on the textual level. This episode demonstrates the unpredictability of xenophobia: the novel suggests that racism may be lurking in the 'sweetest' people and it can strike unexpectedly and without explanation. Meena's comment on this incident expresses the fact that the child is helpless and angry when

facing racist strangers and often capitulates in her attempt to apprehend racial hostility: “I felt right now, hurt, angry, confused, and horribly powerless because this kind of hatred could not be explained” (*Anita* 98).

For Meena, racism displayed by strangers is difficult to handle: the child always falls back on ad hoc reactions of pain, violence and outcries against injustice. However, despite the distress that Meena suffers every time, her encounters with xenophobes are almost always placed in peculiar, if not potentially funny situations deeply unsettling for the reader. As she accompanies her father to one of his office parties, Meena is infuriated by the behaviour and curiosity of a blond little dolly-like girl who reaches out to touch her dark skin:

> The little girl slowly extended one chubby pink finger and stroked the only inch of flesh I had exposed, where my glove did not quite meet my sleeve. Maybe it was the same sense of ownership with which she touched me, maybe it was the regret and resignation in papa’s voice when he talked about his work to Bill, but when she extended her forefinger for the second time, as I knew she would, I bit it as hard as I could. (*Anita* 261)

The reader is presented a droll and rather cartoonish scene: a child bites another child’s finger to punish her curiosity. Yet the underside of the scenery is more complex: Meena senses that the colour of her skin has been discovered as an exotic oddity that needs to be touched, owned and analysed. At the same time, she becomes aware of her father’s conversation with one of his colleagues: Mr Kumar’s submissiveness and bitterness only catalyse Meena’s rage at realising that the colour of her skin has become an object of examination of ‘one chubby pink finger’. Both the sweet-faced lady in the car and the curly little girl represent incidents of “a rude awakening to the realities of adult conflicts, always against the background of a racism which at first is only barely understood” (Dunphy 639). However, as Meena’s awareness of racist thinking and behaviour grows, so does her intention to understand the mechanisms operating behind xenophobia. The text lays open Meena’s attempt to find the cause for her rage as something the child cannot put her finger on (‘maybe it was … ’), thus signalling that Meena’s ‘awakening’ to racial issues and her own ‘Otherness’ due to the colour of her skin is still in process. Over time, the child protagonist will face latent and obvious racial and neo-colonial hostilities in Tollington. Her narrative portrayals of these encounters are then saturated with strategies of the comic such as irony or sarcasm.

‘Othering’ and intolerance are ever-present in Tollington’s community, be they overt or operating behind charity and alleged goodwill. Mr Ormerod, Tollington’s

shopkeeper, is both a charity enthusiast for Africa and an emblem for neo-colonial ideas. The narrative depictions of Mr Ormerod teem with irony, a strategy that in *Anita and Me* serves as an instrument for detecting biased thinking behind a façade of benevolence. In a conversation with the choir ladies, Mr Ormerod challenges the idea that African people in need should receive charity without indoctrination of Western values and lifestyle:

> 'I mean, Mrs Lacey, it's not just about giving them stuff, is it? It's about giving them culture as well, civilisation. A good, true way of living, like what we have. It's all very well just saying hee-yaar, get on with it but they'll just tek us for mugs. They'll want fans next, radios, cookers. I mean, we ain't a charity, are we?' Mrs Lacey nodded her head and then said, 'I thought we was a charity.' 'Well, you know what I mean,' replied Mr Ormerod testily, giving her some change and turning to us with a welcoming smile, completely devoid of irony. (*Anita* 171 f)

This passage exemplifies the existence of what Yasmin Hussain refers to as the "colonialist ethos" of Tollington surrounding Meena and her family (117). Mr Ormerod embodies the post-imperial belief of the British society that it is responsible both for the economic and ideological development of their former colonies. This thought contains a neo-colonial element, namely imposing a Western system of values upon the former colonial subject: Mr Ormerod's efforts to save African children include 'stuff' as well as 'culture', 'civilisation' and a 'true way of living'. According to Hussain, this is a revival of imperialism based upon a false sense of charity and moral responsibility for the Third World, as the Western "civilisation and humanity [are set] against 'savagery', 'native' or 'primitive' identities as their antitheses and objects of reformation" (118). What the textual hints reveal is that Mr Ormerod's sense of charity is far from complete selflessness: he pursues an active promotion of Western ideas and values in return for his goodwill. The irony in this passage possesses several dimensions: on the one hand, Mr Ormerod's statement 'we ain't a charity' is juxtaposed and debunked with Mrs Lacey's remark that they all are, after all, working for charity, thus belying Mr Ormerod's self-created image of benevolence. What is more, when Meena and her father enter the scene, they are greeted with a 'welcoming smile' on the part of Mr Ormerod only seconds after he has expressed his suspicion and disapproval of the unknown 'Other'. As it happens, the Kumars are the only non-white immigrant family in the entire community. Mr Ormerod's absentmindedness sharpens the comic potential of his personality; as characters are unaware of their flaw or inconsistencies, their ridiculousness rises

(Bergson 9). In this scene, textual signals unmask the true nature of Mr Ormerod's charity efforts as he fulminates against ingratitude and greediness of those he allegedly desires to support.

The shoddiness of Mr Ormerod's benefaction is even sharpened by the deformity of his collection box for the poor; it is precisely its trashy appearance that provokes Meena to eventually steal it:

> It was not a proper collection box, you could tell it was a former soup can masquerading as an official charitable receptacle, and besides, the slot in the top for coins was far too big. Someone had clumsily gouged the slot with a knife, so it was just as easy to take money out as put it in … It was when I read the label that I decided to do it; a homemade label on lined paper in blue biro and Mr Ormerod's tense, tiny scrawl, 'BABIES IN AFRICA; PLEASE GIVE!'(*Anita* 154, emphasis in the original)

The shabbiness of the collection box reflects Mr Ormerod's dubious willingness to support 'needy' people in Africa; in fact, as much as a soup can 'masquerades' as a charity box, Mr Ormerod can be seen as a hypocrite masquerading as a benefactor. The textual focus on the size of the slot appears to confirm this charade as it makes it easy to donate and take out money simultaneously. This image is a visual statement of Mr Ormerod's post-imperial charity where donation, domination and exploitation seem to go hand in hand. The outcry written in capital letters does not encourage Meena to donate money but to steal the box, thus robbing a neo-colonial bigot. This episode is satirical: the invocation of a fake donation box combined with a slot that invites to steal as much as to donate functions as an open exposure of Mr Ormerod's false sense of charity paired with neo-colonial tendencies and disguised as willingness to help African people. The ironic portrayal of Mr Ormerod and the satirical display of his donation box stand the textual dismissal of his attitude. The reader is invited to laugh and dismiss Mr Ormerod's fake charity in equal manner.

As a reader, one may expect constant cynical side blows against this rather dubious character; however, Meena is caught in the act of ungrounded suspicion against Mr Ormerod. Visiting his shop with her Indian grandmother for the first time, Meena presumes that Mr Ormerod has given her Nanima[32] too little change. Enraged with anger, Meena affronts the shopkeeper with an outright accusation: "You thought just because she don't speak English you could cheat her! … . You kept sixpence back for yourselves! I expect you'll be giving it to buy that new church roof, won't

[32] Word for 'grandmother' in India.

you!" (*Anita* 225) Meena's attack is directed against Mr Ormerod's latest charity project, namely his replacement of support for babies in Africa for a new church roof in Tollington. However, as it turns out, Meena's Nanima has purchased a chocolate bar for the sixpence that Meena presumed was missing, a humiliating fact that stupefies Meena and makes her want to "lie down … on the pavement and curl up into a very small ball" (*Anita* 226). Despite Mr Ormerod's dubious advocacy for neo-imperialist charity efforts, here he becomes a target of Meena's over-hasty and biased accusations. Anita Roy argues that with the help of incidents like this, *Anita and Me* avoids simplified portrayals of racism and neo-colonialism. I interpret this scene as a sign of textual prudence against too rash accusations and condemnation of racist thinking. Prejudices and intolerance are certainly present in many forms in Tollington, yet its people do not employ racist or neo-colonial attitudes all the time (Roy 26). Meena has to learn this the hard way: regardless of the fact that the child has noticed racist attitudes and behaviour many times, the novel refrains from notions of general suspicion of racist perpetrators.

As much as some characters display unexpected racial assault and abuse and others are unmasked as notorious xenophobes, several scenes in the narrative render an absolute 'recognition' of racist characters impossible. When Meena and her Indian grandmother meet Mr Turvey, an old colonial veteran, Mr Turvey stuns them and all the bystanders with his Punjabi skills and his enthusiasm for India. Having heard enough stories about colonial brutality, Meena confronts the old serviceman in her naive, child-like fashion: "Shouldn't have bloody been there anyway, should you? … . Who asked you to lock up my grandad and steal his chickens?" (*Anita* 222) Once again, the child seizes for simplified (and funny) generalisations, assuming that Mr Turvey personifies the colonial regime in India and has thus participated in assaulting her grandfather. Mr Turvey disarms Meena's obvious contempt by admitting in a serious mannder that "[w]e should never have been there. Criminal it was. Ugly" (*Anita* 222). The text breaks with the image of militant and prejudiced colonial veteran[33]; Meena's accusations are subverted by Mr Turvey's regret and her Nanima's approval that Mr Turvey is in fact a 'nice man' (*Anita* 222). Such incidents invite both Meena and the reader to differentiate and refrain from impulsive

[33] In *White Teeth*, Mr Hamilton, a colonial serviceman, represents a bizarre and manic figure stuck in colonial thinking and brutality; the two characters, Mr Hamilton and Mr Turvey, are thus two antithetic images of colonial military in British migrant fiction.

conclusions: Meena's charges against Mr Ormerod ('you cheated my Nanima') and Mr Turvey ('you locked up my grandad') are (at least in the heat of the given moment) entirely ungrounded and thus crushed by an unexpected outcome or behaviour of the accused person. Despite the child's experience with outright racism, intolerance and neo-colonial prejudices in Tollington, awkward and embarrassing misunderstandings teach Meena to be cautious with general suspicion and overhasty accusations.

In *Anita and Me*, even racial name-calling is put into perspective, as is the perception of 'Blackness' in a predominantly white community. When a new dog named 'Nigger' is introduced to the neighbourhood, the Indian Kumars debate whether the naming of the dog actually alludes to racist attitudes or not. Meena's mother is severely agitated by the fact that the Rutters, a neighbour family, have given their dog a name that, according to her, is well-known for its racist and derogatory connotation. On the other hand, Mr Kumar's response at hearing the dog name is 'uproarious laughter' as he is convinced that "[t]hey don't know it's an insult" (*Anita* 90). The couple remembers another incident that infuriated Mrs Kumar: when confronting a shopkeeper about the name of a wall paint, they find out that he was not aware of the insulting effect it might have on his non-white customers:

> 'You remember when we went into that paint shop, they had a colour called Nigger Brown and you complained? The shopkeeper was most apologetic...' 'Black, brown, what does it matter?' mama continued. 'Just because we are not black, it is still an insult! Have you seen any white paint called Honky With a Hint of White, heh?' (*Anita* 90)

This passage illustrates the ambiguous relationship between ignorance, unconsciousness, and (lack of) intentionality behind expressions and names that are potentially racist and abusive. The question of how to respond to expressions such as 'Nigger' is posed throughout the novel. The divergent standpoints of Mr and Mrs Kumar disclose two possible answers to the question of alleged verbal abuse: Meena's mother is permanently alert to racist motives lurking behind verbal expressions. Her attempt to lecture the shopkeeper about the racist implications of the colour 'Nigger Brown' is illustrative of her efforts to educate people about their ignorance and the consequences of their unconsciousness. In a rather sober manner, Mr Kumar questions the approach taken by his wife by suggesting that it is difficult to accuse individuals of insult and outright racism when they are entirely unaware of

the repercussions some expressions may have. While his wife is determined to raise awareness of racial hostility whenever expressions like ‘Nigger’ occur, Meena’s father displays a more sober, matter-of-fact attitude about what he holds to be an inconvenient, and above all, incorrigible truth: racial slurs such as ‘Nigger’ (or ‘Honky’, for that matter) will always be in circulation. To teach people how to be politically correct about these words means to make them feel apologetic about an offence they have not intended in the first place. What this passage also reveals is that, despite her intent to tackle racial insults such as ‘Nigger’, Mrs Kumar does not refrain from using ‘Honky’, a derogatory term for white people, in order to criticise racist motives in Tollington’s mainly white population. In contrast to the shopkeeper (who has been selling the dubious wall paint rather unsuspectingly), Meena’s mother makes deliberate use of a politically incorrect insult against whites, thus only demonstrating that derogatory terms do not cease to exist even in minds of those who have committed to abolishing politically incorrect expressions in the first place.

Even with such an evidently racist name for a dog as ‘Nigger’, the novel gives the dog’s owners the benefit of the doubt. As previously concluded, Mr Kumar laughs at the dog name choice of the Rutter family, stating they are unaware of the fact that it is an insult (*Anita* 90). This suspicion is confirmed when Meena confronts Tracey Rutter, the child mistress of the dog, about its name. Meena is beside herself pointing out that the name is “stupid” and “like a swear word”, while Tracey professes that the dog is named “'cos of his colour, honest!” and that she did not know it was an insult (*Anita* 235). Meena’s conversation with Tracey is entirely void of comic effects. Instead, it is Tracey who “pleadingly” and “quietly” grows to understand Meena’s agitation (*Anita* 235). With comic misunderstandings and portrayals of untenable accusations on the part of Meena and Mrs Kumar, the novel does not allow for a priori suspicions of racism even when expressions such as ‘Nigger’ occur. Instead, these episodes suggest that their utilization does not postulate racist malice by default. The reader is constantly urged to revisit his or her ready-made assumptions about racist characters in the novel. As Meena detects hatred and suspicion of the ‘Other’ in rather inconspicuous characters and then confronts Mr Ormerod and Mr Topsy with false accusations, *Anita and Me* delivers a complex picture of racist suspects. Despite the fact that Tollington is an ‘inherently racist corner’ permeated by racial slurs and neo-colonial thinking, not every white character automatically falls into this category nor are accusations of racism always

justified.

In Tollington, racism is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond slogans and name-calling; even outright racist violence is put into perspective, as textual portrayals of Sam Lowbridge show. As previously pointed out, even this skinhead youngster has a more complex personality that goes beyond vandalism, paroles and xenophobia (Roy 26). Sam Lowbridge and his gang stand for rebellion, backyard hooliganism, and, very soon, racist violence and abuse in Tollington. At a village gathering, it is Sam who vents his hatred of foreigners and turns into Tollington's mouthpiece against giveaway charity to "some darkies we've never met" (*Anita* 193). Later, Sam is made responsible for a violent attack against an Indian businessman. He also yells Powellist slogans into TV cameras that have come to report on Tollington's slow downfall. In an episode saturated with satirical critique, the text juxtaposes the demolition of the Tollington primary school to the cynical media coverage that chronicles the event in search of a good story. The moment the building is being razed to the ground accompanied by dramatic comments of a regional BBC speaker, Sam enters the scene "emerging through a dustcloud like a divine apparition, albeit on a scooter" and shouting "If You Want A Nigger For A Neighbour, Vote Labour" into the cameras (*Anita* 273). Sam's racist parole is embedded in a scene of slow but steady destruction of the village and its educational infrastructure. With a note of sarcasm, the narrator portrays the BBC as zealous of images of 'weeping women' and close-ups of school buildings being crushed (*Anita* 272). This episode in *Anita and Me* stands for a social microcosm in which social disillusionment and lack of educational possibilities are accompanied by a rise of racist slogans. In this picture, Sam represents a concomitant phenomenon of political ignorance and hatred turning against the 'Other' in the face of social and economic collapse. Whatever bravado Sam tries to simulate on TV, the severity of his right-wing politics and cocky entrance is undermined by the tininess and ridiculousness of his scooter and the insignificance of his gang driving "in his wake[,] like midges following a storm" (*Anita* 273). The ludicrous quality of Sam's appearance suggests that there is nothing brave and bold about loud-mouthed racist paroles. Yet, the severity of the situation is not out of sight: the deterioration of social and educational options goes hand in hand with the need of the economically underprivileged to find a scapegoat to blame. In a moment of revelation oozing bitter sarcasm, the child-narrator realises that Sam, a friend whom she has idealised as brave and rebellious, is

in fact a violent drunkard and racist:

> Was he really Sam Lowbridge the Hero, as I had secretly cast him all these years, the misunderstood rebel with a soul? Was he sliced by a mugger whilst he ran to rescue a fragile old lady from a beating? Was he caught by the flailing claws of a fox he had whisked from under the huntsman's hooves? He exhaled noisily and I knew suddenly how he got his warrior mark: Sam the Drunk, staggering round the back of a pub with half a broken beer bottle in his hand; Sam the Idiot, playing ball with his own flick knife, throwing it against a wall and catching it with his face; Sam the... why couldn't I say it, Sam who cornered someone like my Auntie in a urine-soaked alleyway and unravelled her sari, laughing himself sick, her resistance leaving no mark except the crescent scar where her diamond wedding ring caught the soft skin of his cheek. (*Anita* 311)

Meena's childish fantasies ('Hero', 'rebel with a soul') of Sam Lowbridge as her friend and idol are cruelly disappointed. Sam as the saviour of 'foxes and old ladies' is a myth that Meena herself has created around the young delinquent. Meena's blindness and mythological idealization of a brutaliser is immediately crushed by images of Sam's alcohol abuse and stuporous idiocy. The text deflates Meena's infantile fabrications as fictitious ideals and juxtaposes them with revealing images that lie behind Meena's myth. Sam is the epitome of a 'Drunk', an 'Idiot' who accidentally hurts himself, and – very likely – a 'Racist' (although this label is represented by an ellipsis as a sign that Meena 'couldn't say it'). On the textual level, Meena's image of Sam is brutally and cynically disrupted; the transition from her child-like artlessness to more sober conclusions about Sam is reflected in the succession of possible events that explain how Sam has received his scar – from 'saving foxes' to attacking 'someone like my Auntie'.

Despite the fact that Sam's conduct has in every way violated the idealised image the main protagonist has had of him as a child, other passages in *Anita and Me* suggest a portrayal of Meena's antagonist that goes beyond his idiocy, violence and brutality. As it turns out, Sam comes to the realization that *he*, in fact, is the one deprived of advancement and career opportunities while Meena has all the options to move along. Sam's epiphany of his condition becomes visible in a passage lacking any comic effects. Having avoided Sam and Anita for weeks, Meena is called to help Tracey to save Anita from Sam. In this final showdown, Meena faces her love-hate hero Sam in an argument that uncovers Sam's true feelings for Meena and the realisation that he is stuck in Tollington forever: 'Yow've always been the best wench in Tollington. Anywhere! Dead funny. . . . . But yow wos never gonna look at me, yow won't be stayin will ya? You can move on. How come? How come I can't?'

(*Anita* 314) In non-humorous passages like these, the reader is granted an insight into the complexity of Sam's character that, in this novel, is not defined by xenophobia only. It becomes apparent that Sam is a disaffected individual devoid of socio-economic opportunities while Meena can rely on a solid background that facilitates her access to a better life. As Stein concludes, it is not Meena but

> Sam who is going nowhere. . . . . Sam is aware of the fact that, like many others of his white working-class peers in his village, he is stranded in the demising Tollington without a fair chance of finding employment. As a social outcast, there is no useful place for Sam in the society that has rejected him. (Stein 51)

In *Anita and Me*, the colour of one's skin marks a determinant in the process of social advancement and communal acceptability. However, the novel subverts the preconception of whiteness combined with social superiority. Instead, the predominantly white village of Tollington falls victim to modernization and their own incapacity to adjust. Sam stands for a white working-class youth without an access to what the future holds in store for Meena and her Indian family. As Leila Neti observes, Meena's family perceive themselves as middle-class, a fact that turns them into social outsiders in the mining village of Tollington. Neti concludes that the Kumars abandon the village towards a more prosperous future precisely because they have never belonged to it in the first place due to their ethnicity *and* class (114). It becomes obvious that the combination of skin colour and class in *Anita and Me* challenges the idea of a white socio-economic supremacy opposing immigrant marginalization. Meena's confrontation with Sam reveals that it is Sam who is reduced down to an economically and socially disenfranchised 'Other' deprived of economic growth and improvement of social status ('how come I can't move on?').

Sam's situation is indicative of depression and social disadvantage as palpable phenomena in Tollington's community. As the novel proceeds, the placidity and idyll of Tollington is undermined by the silent economic downfall of the mining village. Facing major agitation and turmoil, Tollington wraps itself in desperate nostalgia of a glorious past in the face of a grim and hopeless present. Meena's narrative portrayal of Tollington's decay is permeated with satirical critique. Its inhabitants sanctify the past, thus camouflaging the present and neglecting any developments for the future. What the narrator discovers is that Tollington has never embodied the ideals they attempt to invoke. Located in the Midlands with its lower class estate council community, Tollington in essence violates the imperial myth of British greatness and

glory. According to Procter, the subversion of this myth is represented by the location of the village. Tollington's remoteness mirrors its provinciality and insularity; having situated it offside the metropolitan vitality, Syal intends to "provincialise Englishness, revealing and satirising the 'smallness' [and] the *ethnicity* of working-class Brummie" life (*Dwelling* 128, emphasis in the original). As the narrator's account of that period shows, its predominantly white inhabitants are "lacking in cosmopolitan sophistication" (Campbell-Hall 292), separated from all the excitement and social change of the 1960s:

> Tollington's version of the sexual revolution was Sam Lowbridge's heavy-petting sessions on the park swings, which were always cut short by a giggling audience of five-year-olds or Mrs Keithley running out of her yard brandishing a garden hose. Drugs were what Mr Ormerod kept on the top shelf of his shop, buttercup syrup, aspirin tablets in fat brown bottles, Old Sloane's Liniment Ointment, a particular sell-out item round spring cleaning time. (*Anita* 164)

In Tollington, the repercussions of the new sexual and narcotic culture of the era are minuscule: while the rest of the country undergoes unprecedented expression of rebellion and individual self-fulfilment, Tollington remains static. Its refusal to adapt to new challenges and demands is reminiscent of what Bergson has termed an inelasticity in character that is worthy of mockery (9). The comic potential lying within the narrative portrait of Tollington in the 1960s emerges from the contrast between the sexual and social changes on the global scale and the fact that they have not caused the slightest movement in Tollington's lifestyle: sexual revolution is juxtaposed with petting on park swings, drugs in Tollington are represented by aspirin and other items that can be found in a 'drugstore'.

As much as Tollington is a community at a standstill, its communal spirit is driven by regression and nostalgia for more noble and prosperous times, as Mr Pembridge's speech at the local Spring Fete shows. Mr Pembridge, a Tory politician, businessman, and the only sign of entrepreneurial success in the village, holds on to reactionary ideas of England's imperial past in his manner, habitus and speech. Facing the construction of a new motorway and the demolition of Tollington's primary school, Mr Pembridge reaches for martial rhetoric in his speech to recruit willing combatants against these projects: "If I can end by quoting a man I am sure is everybody's hero here, Sir Winston Churchill, who said We Will Fight Them on the Beaches... Just like our Winnie, we in Tollington must prepare to fight!" (*Anita* 175) Mr Pembridge's somewhat triumphant and pompous speech is turned on its head; the

Pembridges are sketched as a ludicrous family whose elitism and their glorious past are in fact only farcical imitations of the myth they are eager to epitomize. Mrs Pembridge's conduct and outer appearance, for instance, do not mislead over the unmistakable crudity of a miner's daughter's cockney and voice. As she speaks in front of the Tollington crowd, it is not Meena but a comment made by Mrs Worrall that unmasks her façade of nobleness: "Hark at Lady Muck! Blue blood, my arse. It's gin!" (*Anita* 174) Even the young heir of the family empire, Graham Pembridge, is vulnerable to comic attacks due to his cartoonish appearance; the respectability he supposedly stands for is by far surpassed by his ugliness, speech impediment and the fact that, on a horse, he is out of his element:

> Unfortunately, [Graham's] horse was better looking: Graham Pembridge had his mother's skinny frame and his father's 'mardy' face, and when he stopped to ask us the time, he talked like he had a shilling's worth of gobstoppers in his mouth. He was obviously not a born horseman, and sat like he was waiting for it to explode underneath him. (*Anita* 168)

Once more, the Pembridges as the ostensible ambassadors of a glorious past and elitist thinking are debunked as farcical and inconsistent versions of the myth that they try to perpetuate. The image of noble purity is challenged, as both Graham and his mother are exposed in their pretence of graces such as language, appearance and horse-riding.

Not only the Pembridges, the entire community of Tollington is a far cry from the vision it has of itself. Its inhabitants prefer to consider themselves an idyllic village with communal spirit and solidarity. The truth however, could not be more different: vulgarity, gossip, vandalism and fist fights occur daily, thus turning positive connotations of Englishness such as courtliness and civility on the head. Backyard images of Tollington suggest that being white and English is not connoted with glory, superiority and nobility but with class struggles and lowlife conflicts. According to Hand, *Anita and Me* highlights the overthrow of British myths "by describing the reality of their community amidst an unknown England of violence and insolidarity" (qtd. in Davis 139: 13). After the narrator Meena comments that "attack [as] the best form of defence" is "the expected Tollington stance" (*Anita* 52), she reports on a quarrel between two neighbours:

> There was once a dreadful fight between Karl and Kevin's mum and Mrs Keithley, in which Mrs K (the fecund divorcee), had told the twins' mum that her boys were no better 'than sodding bloody heathens! What kind of little bastards leave turds on people's back stoops, eh?' It began venomously and ended with both women being held back by some passing menfolk whilst

> they exchanged wild swinging blows and spat out words I did not understand but knew somehow I should not repeat at home when I recounted the incident. (*Anita* 52)

Here the reader is invited to witness and gloat over gutter language and behaviour of the working-class culture in rural England. As Bromley observes, Tollington's characters "are often constructed as figures in a Dickensian gallery of working-class stereotypes" (145). The text supports this image by insertions of swearwords and local accent ('sodding bloody') and a fist-fight between women who 'spit out' words too vulgar for Meena to repeat. Passages like these point to the novel's agenda of dismantling the self-righteousness and morality of the white mainstream community particularly with regard to their self-image as "the good, reliable, nosey inhabitants of Tollington" (*Anita* 101). What this example also invokes is an invisible language border separating Meena's family from the rest of the white community. The child leaves out the delicate parts of the quarrel, knowing that street slang and vulgarisms are met with little approval at her middle-class family home. Otano states that Meena's conflict between the local Tollington accent and Standard English opens up new constellations between ethnicity and class (222); the middle-class Kumars prefer operating with Standard English while their daughter has embraced the cockney street slang of the neighbourhood. Otano observes that Meena's parents consciously set themselves apart from any practice that might resemble working-class culture, including the slang with which the rest of the community operates (223). What is more, the Kumars are well aware of their social status and educational background in contrast to Tollington's backwardness and the working-class majority of its inhabitants. As Campbell-Hall notes, it is the Kumars and not their white counterparts that have introduced new lifestyles and a keen sense of what is happening abroad:

> In a direct challenge to outdated colonial notions of Anglo-British superiority, it is the South Asian migrants to the traditionally white community who bring signifiers of civilization (education, knowledge of the world outside Tollington, fluency in other languages) to the village. (Campbell-Hall 296).

In Tollington, it is Meena's family who introduce education, a middle-class lifestyle and connections to both Wolverhampton and India. Their presence sharpens the social deadlock behind Tollington's general backwardness. Nowhere else in the course of events does this become more blatant than during the encounter between Meena's mother Daljit and Anita's mother, Deirdre Rutter. As Meena has stopped

playing with Anita, Deirdre approaches Mrs Kumar speculating that she is the one preventing the friendship between the two girls. The narrator notices that Deirdre's presumption is paired with disbelief: "[H]ow could we possibly think ourselves better than her?" (*Anita* 215) Watching fear and intimidation in Deirdre's face, Meena slips into what she believes is Deirdre's perspective on the arrival and existence of immigrants in Britain:

> Of course [Deirdre's fear] made sense; we were not one of those faceless hordes depicted in the television news, arriving at airports with baggage and children, lost and already defeated, begging for sanctuary. We were not the barely literate, perpetually grinning idiots I occasionally saw in TV comedies, or the confused, helpless innocents I spotted in bus and supermarket queues whilst they tried to make sense of their small change or the gesticulating wanderers who would sometimes stop my papa for directions, holding up pieces of paper with 'Mr Singh, Wolverhampton, England' written on them. (*Anita* 215 f)

This extract contains an accumulation of immigrant images from what must be Deirdre's or any other white person's perspective as: 'faceless hordes', 'grinning idiots' or helpless individuals gesticulating in confusion. This parade of immigrant stereotypes is indicative of how cemented and above all, how condescending the view of the white population is. The text suggests that these bias towards immigration are nurtured virtually daily by TV news, comedies and everyday encounters with immigrant newcomers. At the same time, the narrator Meena distances herself and her family from this image of immigration with the repeated phrase 'we were not'. The Kumars are neither 'grinning idiots' nor 'helpless innocents', a fact that sets this family in an unprecedented context of immigration and social status. Not only do they exceed the majority of Indian immigrants by class and education, they also outbalance Deirdre and the rest of the Tollington community, which becomes obvious in the following passage:

> Mama and papa charmed people, they had bought a new car, they held parties, they did not ask for approval or acceptance but it came to them nevertheless. Deirdre had been seeking approval all her life in this village, her village, and I suppose she wanted to know why life was so bloody unfair. (*Anita* 216)

Again, Meena attempts to capture Deirdre's perspective, sketching her position within Tollington that is so utterly different from the Kumars'. Dunphy correctly states that this encounter between Deirdre and Daljit Kumar represents an "interesting variant of the race dynamic", as the Kumars appear to possess social respectability that Deirdre is denied – despite the colour of her skin (652). This fact

notwithstanding, Deirdre is irritated by the possibility that Daljit Kumar, an Indian woman *and* a well-liked and respected resident of the village, might rise above her: "What Deirdre cannot fathom is how Daljit could possibly feel superior to her for Deirdre is white" (Dunphy 652). The comic effects, albeit subtle, point to this direction. The passage concludes with a cynical bite portrayed from Deirdre's perspective as she wonders 'why life was so bloody unfair': the Kumars are effortlessly accepted in the community while Deirdre remains an outsider regardless of how hard she tries. What seems 'bloody unfair' from Deirdre's point of view is that the colour of skin has not been a detrimental factor for the popularity and ambition of the Kumar family. On the other hand, Deirdre's whiteness alone has not brought her any social or economic advantages within her community.

Deirdre's irritation at her feeling of inadequacy is emblematic for the novel's subversion of ethnicity and superiority. Tollington's predominantly white population consists of "beached white males and females of a deskilled working class, whose 'whiteness' is their only vestigial link with the dominant relations of power" (Bromley 148). For once, the novel dismantles the combination of skin colour and social discrimination by introducing class and education into the equation. Tollington is exposed for what it is: a corroded and corroding mining village populated by a marginalised white mainstream which, for the lack of adaptation and prospects for a better future, clings on to a glorious past and the self-image of white supremacy. The myth of white, supreme and noble Englishness crackles in the light of what Bromley suspects is the 'shadow narrative' underlying the main plot in *Anita and Me*, a narrative "which marks the closure not just of a period of time, but the foreclosure of possibility for a generation of rural working-class …, abandoned in a former mining village, prospectless in the face of urbanisation, speculation and the loss of space" (Bromley 148). As the above examples show, the disillusion beleaguering the mining village and its marginalised provinciality that has never done justice to the ideals its inhabitants desperately attempt to uphold, results in Sam's violent xenophobia, Mr Pembridge's neo-imperialist thinking and Deirdre's more subtle racism against immigrant newcomers. The novel names and shames these developments with outright satire, comic discoveries contradicting boastful rhetoric and subversion of stereotypes of a non-white 'Other' and a superior and white self.

What consequences does this have for the post-colonial perspective on the non-white Kumar family? One is tempted to argue that, in *Anita and Me*, the colour of

one's skin does not lead to automatised social, economic and educational marginalization. The Kumars, after all, are popular, social and well-respected and the only family that manages to leave Tollington for a better future; and, while they are in Tollington, they stand for middle-class respectability and educational ambition. *Anita and Me* certainly subverts the myth of superior white Englishness; yet, it puts race, racial privileging and discrimination of race into perspective. The Asianness of the Kumar family does not represent an obstacle in their economic aspirations nor does it do any damage to the 'charme' of the family. The narrative offers several incidents of racial discrimination but it does not focus on the blackness of one's skin as a determinant of social and economic deprivation. Race matters, but so do class, education and ambition for success. This urges the question whether *Anita and Me*'s treatment of race as a parameter of post-colonial discourse reflects John Ball's criterion of post-colonial 'oppositionality' – or, does *Anita and Me* – in Schoene-Harwood's words - move 'beyond race'?[34] What the novel suggests is that the colour of one's skin is only one marker out of many that has an impact on an individual's position in society. In case of the textual focus on the 'whiteness' of Tollington's inhabitants and the 'non-whiteness' of the Kumar family, the reader's anticipation is reversed and complicated as the Kumars outgrow Tollington *despite* the colour of their skin. The importance of race as a factor that defines one's status is not erased but it is diminished and diluted by other factors that are largely eclipsed in the post-colonial discourse.

Even as an "inherently racist corner of 1960s Britain" (Campbell-Hall 294), Meena's portrait of Tollington is not entirely dismissive. More balanced pictures of the mining village are delivered elsewhere in the text. I will interpret them as a reflection of the protagonist-narrator's affiliation with Tollington as the crib of her childhood regardless of its flaws and inconsistencies. The narrator senses and comments on the stance of the regional authorities who abandon Tollington to its fate as its local school is stamped to the ground and is soon to be followed by greater

[34] Schoene-Harwood focuses on Meena's hybridity as the crucial factor for the child's adaptability that assists her in abandoning the misery of Tollington ("Beyond (T)race" 167). What I find interesting about Schoene-Harwood's conclusion is that race is something that Meena leaves behind the same way she leaves Tollington behind: armed with a hybrid identity and "cosmopolitan vision of the future" ("Beyond (T)race" 167), the child does not prioritise race as a social determinant. I argue, however, that it is not Meena's hybrid position as a post-colonial individual but the complication of racial issues with class, success, and social ubpringing that take away the post-colonial emphasis on race as the crucial marker that constitutes a post-colonial individual's marginalised status in society.

parts of Tollington to make way to a new motorway. Meena's accounts of Tollington's helpless and somewhat resigned protest provoke a sad smile of compassion with the destiny of the village:

> I vaguely remember some hand-drawn protest posters appearing in Mr Ormerod's shop window and Uncle Alan knocking on doors trying to whip up solidarity for a protest march which he had christened Tollington In Turmoil! Until someone pointed out that having T.I.T. emblazoned across your front might attract the wrong kind of support. There was a march, or rather a slow shuffle as there were not many participants who could make it up the hill without a motorised zimmer frame, letters were sent off to our local M P on church-headed notepaper with the usual arguments against destruction of the countryside and levels of noise and air pollution. The authorities did not exactly quake in their shoes faced with this polite provincial request and simply waited until everyone had almost forgotten about the motorway before moving the diggers in. (*Anita* 143)

Despite Meena's mockery of Tollington's efforts to resist modernization and find scapegoats for their misery, a more balanced picture of how little Tollington has to say in creating its own destiny is offered in the passage above. To begin with, Tollington's resistance at the decision of the authorities to bulldoze the village bristles with comic hints pointing at its ineffectiveness: 'hand-drawn posters', dramatic paroles reduced to silly acronyms ('T.I.T.') and 'slow shuffles' instead of protest marches are illustrative examples of Tollington's half-hearted opposition and the resignation of an entire community. Tollington's fruitless, non-serious attempts to prevent its erasure add up to a tragicomic portrait of a village at the mercy of the authorities in charge. The ending of the passage focuses on the indifference and lack of empathy for local concerns on the part of the authorities who 'did not exactly quake in their shoes' and enforced their plans at the sight of Tollington's resignation. In a conclusion free of comic impulses, the narrator is only left to observe the decay of the village of her childhood, lamenting that 'my village was indistinguishable from the suburban mass that had once surrounded it and had finally swallowed it whole' (*Anita* 326). Tollington may be a community brimming with neo-colonial attitudes, racial hostilities and even violence. The narrator, however, also draws a picture of a vanishing village in which feelings of fear and social inferiority trigger the human propensity to blame exclude or even attack a non-white 'Other' to compensate for one's own deficiencies.

Finally, racism in Tollington is not an entirely 'white' syndrome. As the following examples will show, ethnic hostilities operate in the Indian minority community as well, thus disrupting the conventional image of racism as 'Othering' of

non-white subjects and moving it onto a transcultural, more universal level. Although many critics identify racial or ethnic hostility in *Anita and Me* as a disposition that can be encountered with white characters only, Meena witnesses animosities toward the English in her Indian community. On several occasions, the child overhears remarks of dismissal and disparagement of the English among her relatives. Having challenged her mother about 'the Front Garden dilemma' – ornamental English front gardens versus Indian herb patches –, Meena listens as her mother and the Aunties badmouth the English and their alleged shortcomings:

> 'They have to mark out their territory...' It was on the tip of her [mother's] tongue to add '...like dogs', but the Aunties recognised their cue and launched into their own collected proverbs on English behaviour. 'They treat their dogs like children, no, better than their children...' 'They expect their kids to leave home at sixteen, and if they don't they ask for rent! Rent from your kids!' 'They don't like bathing, and when they do, they sit in their own dirty water instead of showering...' . . . . 'You know that barmaid-type woman from up the hill has run away again, this time with the driving instructor. He is called Kenneth and wears tank tops... It's the children I pity...' (*Anita* 33 f)

This tirade between Mrs Kumar and her female relatives appears to be just one out of many well-rehearsed attacks against the English and their way of life, indicated by 'cues' they give each other and the list of 'collected proverbs' against the English they share. The English are 'like dogs', they 'don't like bathing', and they are promiscuous and unsympathetic to their children. Having railed against the rotten family ties, filthiness and promiscuity of the English, it appears rather cynical to believe that the Aunties 'pity their children' as pity and compassion are emotions incompatible with sharp scorn. As Henri Bergson observes, aggressive derision of a target demands an absence of feelings like commiseration: "Indifference is [the laughter's] natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion" (4). The compassion that Meena's aunties declare for English children covers their animosity against the English and the condemnation of their way of life. This passage represents a prime example of ethnic humour and mockery of other cultures and ethnicities as a "way of building oneself up … obviously at the expense of someone else" (Dundes 97). Christie Davies states that in order to establish a positive image of one's own group, outsiders and other groups are derided:

> At one level …, we may see jokes about stupid outsiders as an affirmation of the value of rationality, efficiency and applied intelligence on the part of the joke-tellers, for any failure to live up to and conform these qualities is ascribed to outsiders and then subjected to severe ridicule. It is *they* who are comically stupid and irrational and *we* who are intelligent, skilled and

> organised. (Davies 4, emphasis in the original)

The Indian women clearly establish a positive and superior image of themselves by distancing themselves from English behaviour they consider despicable; in this case, one can even speak of reversed 'Othering'. The Indian community scorns everything about the English that they themselves disclaim: dubious family ties, low hygiene standards and infidelity. What is more, the unsaid but understood comparison of the English with dogs echoes what Edward Said calls 'dehumanized thought'. The potential Other is rid of their humanity, representing "an affront to real civilization" (Said 108). In this case, civilization and decency are preserved by the standards and values within the Indian community while the English 'mark out their territory like dogs', allegedly granting their own dogs more love and better treatment than their own children. By ridiculing the English, Meena's Aunties set themselves apart from what they perceive is the inferior culture of Tollington, thus "creating a superior culture that rejects White Eurocentric culture, especially in its crudest form" (Hussain 122).

After the women have exchanged their notorious taunts of the English, Meena has to leave the scenery so as not to witness further conversation and joking:

> … I would be sent on a non-existent errand so my mother could finish the latest piece of yard gossip whilst the Aunties would listen wide-eyed, ears flapping, moustaches quivering, glad they had made the perilous journey from the civilised side of Wolverhampton to catch up on the peculiar goings on of the 'gores'. There was much affectionate laughter, but laughter all the same, tinged with something like revenge. (*Anita* 34)

Having drawn a 'Dickensian' portrait of fist-fights in Tollington's lower class, Meena now portrays her Aunties as caricatures[35] eager for scandals and things to condemn about the English. In this passage, they are reduced to ludicrous movements of their body parts such as ears and moustaches that are engaged in high excitement over the newest rumour. Once more, the text conveys the 'Orientalist' contrast between the 'civilised' and the primitive side of Wolverhampton, the former represented by Indian civility and the latter inhabited by the 'gores'.[36] The novel suggests that ethnic

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[35] According to Freud, caricature is an instrument of mocking degradation, by which two strategies play an important role: the isolation of a distinctive body part or trait and its exaggeration or negative focus upon that deficiency (213).

[36] The online *Urban Dictionary* suggests that 'gora' is an expression used in the Indian community; it is comparable to 'gringo' as used by Mexican people or 'cracker', an equivalent term used by black people. 'Gora' is a derogatory expression for whites. 8 Aug. 2012 <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gora>.

denotations circulate on both sides, the Indian and the English: ‘gore’ is an Indian derogatory term for white skin as is the above mentioned ‘Nigger’ for black skin. Both communities, white and non-white, use the complexion of their respective ‘Other’ to generate derogatory nicknames for it. According to Irving Lewis Allen, ethnic name-calling occurs both in mainstream and minority cultures. Minorities use name-calling in order to define “legitimate targets of aggression” (15), in this case, the majority society. Marginalised ethnic groups distance themselves from the cultural mainstream and, as Allen puts it, ‘dignify’ their minority status, thus opposing the social discrimination inflicted on them by the mainstream centre of power (I. Allen 15). In the above passage, this is signalled by the Indian women’s ‘laughter of revenge’ at the English. With their mockery of English behaviour, Meena’s Aunties insist upon the exclusiveness of their Indian community. At the same time, they retaliate against the English for the discrimination and injustices they have to suffer as Indian immigrants. What these insights into the in-group dynamics of the Indian community show, is that ethnic derision and disparagement is a circumstance occurring both in the cultural mainstream and on its margins where words like ‘gore/gora’ and ‘Honky’ are as abusive as ‘wog’ and ‘Nigger’.

Eventually, Meena discovers and confronts ‘racial’ hatred within herself. In an epiphany entirely void of any comic impulses, Meena realises that she has put on display the same irrational hatred as her skinhead antagonist Sam Lowbridge. From the very start, the child utterly despises Nigger, the dog of the Rutter family. It is only after she witnesses the dog’s painful death that Meena comes to the conclusion that she has hated the dog only for the name it has been given:

> Each step triggered an image, … the piddly poodle skittering round my heels, his stupid grateful bark, Tracey kissing his soggy snout, the convulsions of his twisted back legs, and how often I had wished him dead. I had blamed him for what he was called, not what he was, had made him the focus of my resentment and hatred, knowing he was in no position but to accept it. Sam Lowbridge and I had that in common at least. (*Anita* 245)

Having uncovered fears and hatred of the unknown and ‘Other’ in virtually all segments of Tollington, Meena now concentrates on hatred within herself while refraining from any irony or comic impulses. The comparison of racial hatred is straightforward: Meena compares herself with Sam in her contempt for a dog that has had little say in the name it has been given. The child-narrator realises that her rage at the dog’s name has prevented her from recognising ‘what he was’; the dog is left with nothing but ‘to accept’ being the target of Meena’s aversion. Meena comes face-

to-face with the fact that she has let a label ('Nigger') determine her hatred and misjudgement of another being – and not, *who* or *what* they are. The child thus confronts in herself what Hanif Kureishi has referred to as the 'evil of racism', namely complete erasure of empathy ('I had wished him dead') and the degradation of another being's dignity and soul ("The Rainbow Sign" 48 f).[37] Following all the incidents of neo-colonialist thinking, racial exclusion and ethnic derision in Tollington, the novel brings into focus the child's epiphany that reveals that not even Meena is immune to mechanisms of labelling and exclusion. It is symptomatic for the moral impetus of a passage that contains 'serious relief' (Attardo 89). Meena comes to realize that irrational hatred is a human weakness that lies within all human beings, including herself.

In an environment where no group or individual seems immune against excluding others, *Anita and Me* does not allow for simplified idealizations of perpetrators and victims. Post-colonial 'oppositionality' and 'writing back' against racism fall short on explaining the complexity of textual treatment of racism in *Anita and Me*. The novel tackles and shames xenophobic tendencies and discrimination wherever they occur in Tollington. At the same time, it explores factors that trigger racial hostility in all the villagers of the community. Race is inextricably linked with class, education, and ambition. In *Anita and Me*, it ceases to be the key factor in social deprivation or economic success. For those inhabitants of Tollington who belong to the white and socially deprived working-class, racism and neo-colonial nostalgia represent strategies of compensation that ensure an (otherwise non-existing) feeling of superiority. For the non-white Indian community, ethnic hostility against the English is a weapon of revenge that offsets the marginalisation they have to endure and a device that solidifies the diasporic community as more civilised than its English counterpart. For Meena, hatred of a being because he or she is different represents a human deficiency that she even pinpoints within herself. In *Anita and Me*, the post-colonial 'oppositionality' against racism is expanded by the human and the social factor. Certainly, racism is debunked and dismissed as a highly destructive human trait triggered by social phenomena, but the Syal's novel puts it into perspective as a concomitant effect of social decay and marginalization.

[37] Admittedly, Meena's hatred is not directed against a human being but a dog with an insulting name; nevertheless, she becomes conscious of the very same contempt within herself that she has encountered with Sam Lowbridge.

1.2 Agency and Belonging in *Anita and Me*: Between Discord and Affiliation with the Indian Community

Anita and Me is also a novel about a child's relationship with her own Indian heritage. The question of positioning oneself in relation to the communal forces of one's own diaspora and ethnic origin brings into the arena two key concerns of this analysis: post-colonial 'referentiality' (Ball 2) and the issue of home and belonging. In other words: how does the post-colonial agency for the minorities and the marginalised come into play in *Anita and Me* and the comic effects employed in the novel? To what extent does the comic tone enforce or dismiss the impression that the child-narrator belongs to the community she is expected to represent? Does belonging to a culture automatically imply unconditional ambassadorship for that culture? The novel investigates these questions with the help of comic effects on the textual level while the child-narrator takes a stand on her status within her community and her disposition towards communal dynamics. What is sure is that belonging and affiliation to the Indian community do not simply ensue by the virtue of birth or family ties. In Meena's retrospective as a narrator, her communal ties are shaped both by affection and critique. The double-edged nature of Meena's belonging to her kin reflects itself in her portrayals of her parents and relatives. The comic effects that pervade these portrayals add up to an overall tone that ranges from sarcasm and outright mockery to more conciliatory nuances of goodwill humour.

The absurd side of Meena's kin is exposed with the help of what Martin and his colleagues refer to as 'affiliative humour', a disposition with which the butt of a joke is not harmed but met with sympathy and benevolence (53). Regardless of her mockery of family customs and cultural traditions, Meena as narrator never fully demolishes the integrity of her Indian parents and relatives. She may recurrently see them as cartoonish characters, but her point of view is balanced. Textual passages that generate a reconciliatory comic tone reflect this balance. As Dieter Berger also reminds us, positive or affiliative humour largely signifies and also encourages solidarity and sympathy with the butt of the joke, thus abolishing hostilities and constraints against the targeted object (D. Berger 13 f). In the case of *Anita and Me*, the benign quality of the narrator's wit indicates Meena's sense of belonging and identification with her kin.

Several critics[38] have thematised the idea of home and belonging in *Anita and Me. T*he question of Meena's orbit of belonging has ever since been the apple of discord in this debate: is it her parents' homeland India, the Indian diasporic community, or, echoing Homi Bhabha, a Third Space between the Indian and the local Tollington culture? Before addressing these critical voices, I find it important to recall the significance of home and belonging in the post-colonial debate. According to McLeod, home and belonging depend on the existence of fixed categories such as roots or culture (*Beginning* 214).Yet, Bhabha reminds us that post-colonial subjects are in essence hybrid individuals who dwell in a Third Space between two cultures that prevents them from belonging to either of these cultures (219). In other words, home and belonging are virtually incompatible with the hybrid state of constant transformation of culture and identity. Yet, British migrant fiction (including *Anita and Me*) lays its focus on the desire to belong and on strategies how to manifest this condition – despite the consensus of the post-colonial discourse over the impracticability of home and belonging in a sphere of disrupted and fluctuating identities. Yasmin Hussain notices this discord between post-colonial writing and contemporary migrant fiction. She argues that belonging and making oneself at home represent specific features of British South Asian writing that differ from the notorious issues of erosion of identity and disruption through displacement as key concerns in post-colonial literature (61). In other words, the mere fact that belonging plays a vital role in migrant writing points to new perspectives upon a subject that, in post-colonial discourse, is considered highly problematic.

What parameters constitute Meena's sense of belonging? Many critics have pointed to the child's recovery of ties with Indian language and culture. The resource of Meena's efforts to feel at peace with her own identity lies in the discovery of the long forsaken Indian homeland and her social network within the Indian diaspora. Critics such as Monika Fludernik see home and belonging realised in a new Indian diaspora that seeks for the creation of a new home in their new homeland Britain. According to Fludernik, this new Indian diaspora consists of a grid of family members and friends that offer support to the diasporic individual (Fludernik 283 f). Leila Neti follows suit by arguing that, by and by, Syal's protagonist Meena detects this invisible diasporic cord, that "eventually brings her to the realisation that there

[38] Bromley (2000); Hussain (2005); Fludernik (2003); Neti (2008); Gunning (2011).

is, in fact, a bond of affection and real community among herself, her parents, and the aunties and uncles she worked so hard to distance herself from" (Neti 111 f). Meena's lack of Punjabi skills and her subsequent retreat to Indian culture when her grandmother visits are even perceived as Syal's personal agenda to encourage migrant families to speak their language of origin at home (Dunphy 549). As Ranasinha reminds us that the British-born Meera Syal has strong ties to her parental origin, speaks fluent Punjabi and has had access to Indian culture and experience from the very beginning (230), this agenda might even appear plausible. Meena's recovery of her Indian heritage is indeed an important step towards the child's maturity that the novel seems to encourage.

However, critics such as Gunning interpret Meena's cultural recovery as "Syal's cultural conservatism" in which personal growth and social integration are only possible by reclaiming Asian culture (114). Gunning criticizes Syal's promotion of retrieving of what he calls "an older sense of belonging" (148) to the Asian culture of origin. This 'old' idea of belonging requires a fixed culture with equally fixed markers of orientation that posit a feeling of dwelling as soon as they are internalised. According to Gunning, this strategy of belonging is incompatible with today's hybrid identities. The traditional ethnic heritage that individuals fall back on is fixed, and yet today's hybrid identities drawing from it are fluid. Gunning is suspicious of the novel's endorsement for the fixed Indian culture in the past *and* the simultaneous promotion of Meena's hybrid Asian identity in the present (148) as he sees a contradiction in the way fixed cultural systems and hybrid identities are portrayed in *Anita and Me*: "The novel wants simultaneously to insist on the possibility of change within, *and* the essential diachronic sameness of, ethnic cultures" (Gunning 148, emphasis in the original). In other words, Indian culture from the past appears to be trusted and solid, while identities emerging from it today are hybrid – a dissonance that, according to Gunning, remains unresolved in the novel (148). In a sense, Gunning echoes Homi Bhabha's objection about belonging of hybrid individuals who, by inhabiting a Third Space between cultures, never belong to nor rely upon the fixity of either of them (219). Put more simply, either one is hybrid, *or* one belongs to a hermetic cultural system.

The premise I propose is that *Anita and Me* does not enforce the concept of hybrid identities as such. Instead, the novel explores how its characters attempt to belong despite a hybridised environment that offers little fixity and orientation. The

comic effects are vital in this undertaking: with impulses of irony, sarcasm and caricature, the novel tackles the very same parameters of cultural orientation that Meena seizes upon in her quest for a growing understanding of herself and her identity. Meena's desire to know her Indian origins does not lead to unreflected acquisition of cultural tradition and knowledge. Quite the contrary, many aspects of her ethnicity (including expectations made upon community members) come under heavy fire of the narrator's scorn. The comic mode of the novel, whether it is aggressive or benevolent, mirrors Meena's sense of (un)belonging to the community. I therefore postulate the notion of 'critical belonging' to and 'critical agency' of Meena's Indian culture of origin: a complex relationship shaped by both affiliative humour and sarcastic critique that does not allow for categorical dismissal nor complete imitation of both the Indian homeland and its diasporic community in Britain. Critical belonging thus offers a sense of belonging and identification to the communal some degree. My concept of critical belonging clashes with Bhabha's post-colonial notion of hybridity and Third Space as termini that accentuate dwelling between cultures, re-negotiation of cultural fixity and mutability of identity. It denotes a hybrid individual's desire for domestication within and a better understanding of solid systems of cultural reference.

The quest for identity and the recovery of one's own ethnic roots and heritage is a major motif in all the novels under survey. In *Anita and Me*, the child protagonist uses her Indian heritage in order to grow and gain more understanding of the world that surrounds her. The restoration of the Punjabi language and the personal connection to her grandmother from India cause an act of healing and empowerment in Meena's personality with which she is eventually able to cut the cord from her dependent relationship with Anita Rutter, and set new priorities such as school education and fantasising about her own library. Dunphy has already pointed out that Meena's retreat to Indian heritage and language is treated as a personal and cultural enrichment in *Anita and Me* (649). This positive attitude towards knowledge of one's own culture and a motivational link to the homeland of India is also visible in the comic portrayal of items, events and people that are able to deliver that knowledge and establish that link. In Meena's case, it is the images and descriptions of India, her grandmother and her relatives that help her accomplish this task. Consequently, Meena's comic treatment of these ideas and individuals on the textual level is softened through what Martin et al. refer to as 'affiliative humor' (53). As a

consequence, benevolent teasing generated by this type of comic portrayal echoes the affection of the narrator and invites the reader to share that very same feeling. Meena displays patterns of this benign humour as she tries to imagine her grandparents in a fantasy family portrait. Inspired by the Waltzer ride on the local fairground, Meena places them in waltzer cars, and equips them with candy, pets and pop music:

> I suddenly had a vivid picture of all my grandparents, dressed as they were in their photographs, being sedately whirled round in their waltzer cars. Dadima holding a goldfish in a plastic bag, Dadaji sucking on a candy floss, whilst Nanima sang along to the thumping soundtrack of 'All You Need Is Love' and Nanaji kept time with a tapping sandalled foot, holding onto his turban with long brown fingers… (*Anita* 102)

The comic momentum of this passage lies in the collision of an old family photograph as a typical nostalgic item brought to the new homeland from India *and* the local Tollington fairground as its setting. The child's innocent imagination is a crucial impetus for this comic dissonance as she reassembles two different and separate realities into a completely new picture. What is striking here is the fact that Meena loves the fairground, but she is also mystified by her grandparents – whom she has never met. In her mind, the combination of these two worlds results in a cheery portrayal of her imagined India as childhood delight, which is this novel's (comic) re-interpretation of Salman Rushdie's notion of 'imaginary homelands'.[39] Meena fictionalizes her ideas about India in a child-like and somewhat comic manner, but unlike Rushdie or other expatriate Indian writers, the child has no actual memories to draw from or to reconstruct. Instead, she plays on her parents' recollections and her own imagination. This process of imaginary visualization also echoes Vijay Mishra's description of the practices of the traditional South Asian diaspora "where imagination was triggered by the contents in gunny sacks: a Ganesha icon, a dog-eared copy of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Qur'ān*, an old sari or other *deshi* outfit, a photograph of a pilgrimage" (Mishra 4, emphasis in the original). To Meena, India is an imaginary playground at best and a fiction set on a fairground in Tollington. However, the (comic) effect of Meena's imagination is a reconciliation of her parents' and her own Indian heritage and her immediate Tollington environment. Rushdie points to the power of imagination as a strategy to create new worlds that consist of old cultures and new settings:

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[39] Rushdie argues that writers outside of India who write about India "create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind". All these writers can rely on are singular items and fractions of their memories (Rushdie 10).

> Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with these problems. It offers a way of echoing in the form of our work the issues faced by all of us: how to build a new, 'modern' world out of an old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which we have brought into the heart of a newer one. (Rushdie 19)

It is with the help of comic mingling of people and settings that Meena constructs coherence and belonging, if only for a little while. With the incongruous image of her Indian grandparents on a Tollington fairground, the child constructs a peculiarly harmonious union of two worlds she is fascinated by as a place where she feels at home. On the other hand, as soon as Meena is asked or expected to envision her relatives in India and recover family ties from yellowed photographs, she offers resistance:

> It was a litany I knew well, from being sat down in front of photos from India and forced to memorise my parents' many brothers and sisters by name, occupation, and personality quirks. 'This is your *Thaya*,' papa would say. 'Clerk, sweet tooth, married, prone to crying over nothing in particular...' as if committing them to memory would make up for not being with them. Mrs Worrall listened carefully to my monologue and then said, 'Yow must be mad. What do yow want *more* relatives for? Yow want extra, tek a few of mine. Selfish sods, all of 'em,' and lumbered back into her kitchen. (*Anita* 30, emphasis in the original).

This time, relatives from India are not embedded in a fairground picture but in a 'litany': memorising and calling forth family bonds across continents contradicts Meena's own attempts to reconcile her grandparents with fairground imagery in Tollington. It seems that voluntariness and a free desire to indulge one's own heritage play a vital role. As soon as Meena is expected to belong to continental India and follow the parental practice of renewing that connection, she counters her parents' strategies of memorisation with lack of understanding ('as if committing them … with them'). In this quote, the narrator fleshes out the absurdity of establishing a family bond with the help of pictures and mere repetition of information with nothing to draw from real-life experience. To the child, her relatives in India are lifeless objects who do not come alive only because her parents wish her to do so. In contrast to that, as we have seen in the previous example, Meena's grandparents are very much brought to life in her own imagination and at her own will. For Meena, the parental routine resembles repeated yet futile reanimation of family ties. Textual critique of this conflict is signalled and heightened by Mrs Worrall's scoffing comment on the habit of the Kumars to uphold kin linkages ('What do yow want *more* relatives for?); her opposing perspective and remark

counters the Kumars' family practice of memorization. Meena's neighbour evaluates *her* relatives by their selfishness and not by the mere fact that they are related. Mrs Worrall's dismissive remark also echoes the child-narrator's complaint about memorising facts about relatives she has never met, but whom she has to respect and cherish out of family duty. Old family photographs by no means trigger the child's feeling of closeness to her family in India as her own fantasies do, a fact that proves that Meena is not unconditionally receptive for her parents' nostalgic memories of India. The child is by far more engaged in her own imaginative interpretations of India than in forced replication of memories that are not her own and seem too detached to generate a sense of belonging. However, the purpose of Meena's imaginative fabrications *and* her parents' appreciation of old photographs of India is identical: both are strategies of (re-)claiming Indian family roots as one's own and creating contexts in which this heritage conveys a meaning.

Meena's encounter with India materialises when she actually meets Nanima, her grandmother from India, for the first time. Her welcome scene is pervaded by smells, feelings and noises that overwhelm the child with a feeling of comfort:

> [A]nd suddenly I was in the middle of a soft warm pillow which smelt of cardamom and sweet sharp sweat, and there was hot breath whispering in my ear, endearments in Punjabi which needed no translation, and the tears I was praying would come to prove I was a dutiful granddaughter, came spilling out with no effort at all. (*Anita* 200)

For once Meena hopes that she will be able to play the role of the 'dutiful granddaughter' with public tears as a sign of true joy of being united with her grandmother. The episode, however, is resolved in 'effortless' tears of Meena's joy, tears she does not have to mimic in order to oblige this expectation. Finding herself 'in the middle of' this softness, its familiar smells and whispers, it is in the arms of her Nanima that Meena experiences a feeling of belonging that brings tears to her eyes. Meena's delight even increases as she realises that "Nanima was going to be fun when she rolled backwards into the farty settee and let out a howl of laughter" (*Anita* 200). The function of laughter in this specific context is interesting because, as already discussed in the chapter on humour theory, laughter is a physical sign of resolution of the comic potential of an incongruity; one of its functions is to offer relief from tension. Or as Ermida puts it: "When we laugh, we temporarily liberate ourselves from the fetters and limitations that oppress us, and we express emotions that would otherwise be forbidden" (22). The possible tension in Meena's case could

be her insecurity in front of a well-respected family member and her encounter with the unknown as the real Nanima might represent a far cry from the Nanima the child has contemplated in her daydreams. Her grandmother's hearty laugh at the fake fart of the sofa counters the snobbish response of the Indian community in Britain "who all knew each other and if you farted, would phone you up to complain about the smell" (*Anita* 149). Meena instantly embraces the easiness of her Nanima and, a few pages later, will laugh at her "enormous rasping fart which seemed to go on forever and shook the quilt around her" (*Anita* 207). On many occasions, narrative portrayals of Meena's Nanima possess slapstick quality: she is surrounded by shaking quilts and pieces of furniture as 'whoopee cushions'. Meena herself uses slapstick comedy in order to make her grandmother laugh: "I ran around the front room whooping 'Junglee! Junglee!' and doing mock kung fu kicks at my shadow on the wall to make Nanima laugh even harder" (*Anita* 200). The bond of sympathy and conspiracy between Meena and her Indian grandmother is visible in their shared sense of appreciation for slapstick and the silent but firm recognition of each other: Meena realises that her Nanima is 'going to be fun', but she is also being accepted by her Nanima as 'junglee', a wild and untameable girl (*Anita* 200 f).

Nanima's farewell scene from Meena provides the final evidence of this bond. Meena has fallen off a pony and lies in the hospital. As Nanima comes to take farewell, the passage emanates affectionate humour: "Nanima was not her usual ironic self … . I knew there was something drastically wrong when she refused the sweetmeats and Milk Tray being waved enticingly under her nose" (*Anita* 287). The comic potential of this description lies in Nanima's addiction to candy and her childish lack of free will to refuse it. Love of slapstick and love of sweets are two childlike characteristics shared by Meena and her grandmother. However, the severity of emotions in the upcoming scene is characterised by the absence of the comic. In this manner, the farewell scene echoes the greeting scene with Nanima. Meena's attempts to mock the situation at hand have little effect in the face of true emotions, be that joy or sorrow. Her pretended chirpiness represents an attempt to be brave at the forthcoming loss of a beloved family member. She does not succeed in cheering up her family or herself; instead, her "overloud and unnecessarily bouncy" Punjabi Happy Birthday song for Sunil frightens her baby brother, while all Meena can think of is"patting Nanima's gnarled hands which I would mourn forever" (*Anita* 288). The pain that the child-narrator almost fails to cover is the trauma of loss of a

family member and the vivid portrayal of India her grandmother embodies. This scene strongly reflects what Vijay Mishra suggests is the diasporic trauma of the Indian community: "In the case of diaspora the fantasy of the homeland is linked to that recollected trauma that stands for the sign of having been wrenched from one's mother (father) land" (16). The separation from the homeland is equated with the separation from family. Finally, Meena has fully experienced that very same experience of having to part with a part of herself, a "corner of me that would be forever not England" (*Anita* 112) represented by her Indian grandmother. Although it offers little relief from the upcoming separation, the sheer presence of Meena's comic bravery is an imitation of the parental stoicism in the face of their struggle in life. The smile that Meena manages to offer Nanima reflects her parents' stamina and endurance of grief "for our sakes, for the sakes of others watching, for the sake of their own sanity" (*Anita* 288). As this passage shows, Meena's attempted chirpiness mirrors the family attitude of swallowing down pain over the loss of a family member and their Indian homeland. What is more, her sad but comic recollections of the scene contain diasporic nostalgia for a sense of belonging to India: "But I did not crack, even when she said goodbye and leaned over me, smoothing my hair back into the horrible centre parting she thought suited me, whispering her familiar prayer" (*Anita* 288). Holding back her grief, Meena focuses upon her grandmother's gentle but awkward hand movement of parting Meena's hair in her well-known and 'horrible' way. In the awareness of the forthcoming loss and a farewell for good, this marks a comic and yet wistful longing for a memorable gesture that would have been annoying otherwise. In this passage towards the end of the novel, comic impulses are embedded in an overall grievous departure scene, signifying the memorability of funny things that mark Nanima's uniqueness for Meena, but also echoing the diasporic practice of remembering one's homeland and its people in a warm-hearted and nostalgic manner.

What Meena's comic and amiable portrayal of Nanima shows is that, the more the first-person narrator identifies with a person or a group of people, the more 'affiliative' her sense of humour appears. Satire or comic criticism is blinded out in the light of the parallels between Meena and her grandmother, as Meena readily accepts her as a role model and a person of integrity. However, not all family members are portrayed in such an affectionate manner. As regards the family ties in Meena's local Indian community, the text reports on "hords of aunties" and uncles

(Flint 42) that basically consist of grown-ups "old enough to boss [Meena] around" (*Anita* 29):

> Individually, the Aunties were a powerful force … but together they were a formidable mafia whose collective approval was a blessing, and whose communal contempt was a curse wrapped up in sweet sari-shaped packages. I found myself continually surprised at how these smiling women who would serve up their husband's food first with such wifely devotion, could also be capable of such gentle malice. (*Anita* 33)

Compared to the benign humour pervading portrayals of her grandmother, Meena now operates with more aggressive humour in order to target her Aunties' follies. Behind the image of loving wives, the narrator detects 'a mafia' of women whose contempt one has to dread. Meena's cynicism in this passage is generated by the incommensurability of 'sweet sari-shaped packages' with which public condemnation is delivered. This condemnation ranges from homework inspections to crash diet advice one has not asked for (*Anita* 239). The communal pressure caused by Meena's Aunties certainly does not correspond the network of family and friends that Fludernik envisions as the new haven of belonging and safety for Indian expatriates (283 f). In fact, the child's resistance and her mockery are indicative of the novel's critique of diasporic communities in Britain as places that can actually cause a feeling of dis-belonging. In *Anita and Me*, an idealization of the ethnic communal as a nucleus of orientation, safety and belonging is out of place. The narrator's derisive critique seems to be a factor that adds up to her rebellion against collective expectations.

And yet, other passages guide the reader towards a more balanced perspective on Meena's shrill and overpowering Aunties. In an attempt to capture and apprehend her Aunties' misery and life struggles in Britain, Meena senses a

> resignation … in the voices of my Aunties when they spoke of back home or their children's bad manners or the wearying monotony of their jobs. My Aunties did not rage against fate or England, when they swapped misery tales, they put everything down to the will of Bhagwan, their karma, their just deserts inherited from their last incarnation which they had to live through and solve with grace and dignity. In the end, they knew God was on their side … . (*Anita* 67)

Regardless of how strongly she may oppose her Aunties' regular streaks of paternalization, Meena has a sympathetic ear for the way they endure their hardships. In these more sober-minded, more emphatic passages, Meena critique is balanced by insights that offer a deeper look into the Aunties' lives with a sense of understanding:

disobeying children, monotonous jobs and immigrant struggles mark their destinies. Meena's empathy is sincere as her portrayals are entirely void of aggressive mockery or comic side blows. Without these milder tones, her otherwise shrill, loud and mostly unbearable Aunties would remain only caricature-like creatures. Instead, the narrative contains more thoughtful portraits by which characters are lend a depth in their personality that would otherwise remain cartoonish and over-simplified (Attardo 89). Attardo also argues that serious passages in overal comic texts contain moral implications or lessons to be learned (89). It is thus safe to argue that with the help of serious passages, Meena expresses her compassion with her at times irritant relatives, while the text itself achieves a balance between comic and more sober portrayals.

Some passages reveal that Meena even romanticizes facets of India with the same enthusiasm as her noisy and flamboyant relatives. The recount of Rita Farrier becoming the first Indian Miss World is one such example of shared excitement. On the one hand, the narrator mocks the manner with which her relatives glorify Miss Farrier as the ideal of an Indian woman. In the same breath, Meena indulges in a childhood fantasy similar to the picture of her grandparents on a local fairground. As the Kumars have invited to an "impromptu party" (*Anita* 166) in Rita Farrier's honour, Meena witnesses the pride and delight with which her family and relatives bask in the success of a fellow compatriot:

> 'And she a doctor as well!' crowed Auntie Shaila, everyone's long-held belief confirmed that Indian women were the brainiest and most beautiful in the world. If only Rita Farrier had come along when I was ten and it was Spring, and I could have taken her hand and walked down the main street in Tollington, both of us in saris, her stethoscope flapping around her long brown neck. (*Anita* 166)

Auntie Shaila's enthusiasm over Rita Farrier evokes an Indian cliché belief in the beauty and intellect of Indian women. Meena mocks the way with which her relatives celebrate the 'self-evident' validation of their beliefs by exaggerating the brains and the beauty of Rita Farrier. The child snorts at the self-aggrandisement of the Indian community caused by a Miss World title; yet, at the same time, Meena herself longs for the presence of Rita Farrier in Tollington. Once again, the narrator employs childlike fantasies (like the image with her grandparents on a fairground) in which incongruent elements are brought together in ludicrous fashion: dressed in a sari with a stethoscope, Rita Farrier serves as Meena's comrade and role model in Tollington. Education, manners, beauty, and an enjoyable personality are all traits the

Indian Rita Farrier has to offer; yet, they also collide with the beauty ideals Meena has to face in Western youth culture represented by *Jackie*, a girls' magazine, where the girls are blond, blue-eyed and slim and constantly engaged with "[b]oys [and] how to attract them, keep them, get rid of them" (*Anita* 137). Regardless of the illusionary and comic character of her visions, Meena manages to set up imaginary worlds of belonging and images that put her at ease with her Indian identity. Portrayals of Nanima, Meena's Indian grandparents on a fairground, and Rita Farrier are permeated with a more frolic tone, friskiness and affectionate humour that all signify the emotional attachment of the child.

Meena's bond with Indian role models and her belated harmony with her ethnic heritage as a source of belonging are not simply manifestations of "cultural conservatism" as a kind of retreat (or escape) to Indian homeland and diasporic traditionality as suggested by Gunning (114). In fact, despite Meena's association with her Indian parents and relatives, several critics question whether the child-narrator can be seen as an integral part or even a representative of her ethnic minority and Indian diaspora in Britain. In other words, Meena's newly found admiration of her heritage does not make her an ethnic representative and ambassador of Indian culture by default. On the contrary, Procter argues that Meena is a "seriously 'flawed' narrator" who fails as an "authentically 'right-on' ethnic subject" (*Dwelling* 157). Meenas extraordinariness is reflected in her position within her Indian community. Her relationship with her parents and her encounters with her numerous relatives are disrupted on a regular basis because of her disapproval of parental and communal expectations and particularly because of her friendship with the local rebel Anita Rutter. According to Procter, Meena opposes the concept of *izzat* or family pride and honour by her regular attempts to break out and emancipate herself from the image of a desirable Indian daughter (*Dwelling* 157).

Meena's connection to her parents' heritage and community is therefore ambiguous and put into question many times throughout the novel. Meena's little knowledge of India mirrors Syal's own experience as a child and adolescent. Syal herself reports that, to her, India has been a myth for years until she visited it at the age of 22. For Syal, the images of present-day India collide with the "frozen and fossilised" version of the homeland that first-generation immigrants are desperate to preserve and pass on to their children as an absolute that is not to be doubted (qtd. in Ranasinha 224). Ranasinha states that "[a]ny suggestion that the first generation

represents an 'authentic' India is disrupted in [Syal's] work" (260). Syal herself comments on the backwardness of her diasporic fellow countrymen by arguing "in actuality, the India they all knew had vanished around the time of black and white movies and enforced sterilization" (qtd. in Ranasinha 260). The author's contestation of an authentic India encapsulated in the traditional practices of the first-generation immigrants in Britain is reflected in Meena's distance towards anything traditional and desired by her parents. This distance manifests itself in aggressive derision of Meena's community.

In *Anita and Me*, traditionality, backwardness and rigid gender role-models represent elements immanent to the Indian community which the novel thematizes in a highly critical manner. *Anita and Me* attacks the cultural expectations imposed upon the female members of the Indian community or, in Yasmin Hussain's words, "the duties ascribed by culture, … [and the women's] willingness to submit to the demands of the family, which makes them vulnerable to control" (29). Ideals of Indian daughters, wives and women are exposed to narrator's commentary and evaluation. For instance, Pinky and Baby, Meena's two cousins, represent everything that Meena hates about desirable Indian daughters,

> who displayed their medals from the debating society on their chichi dressing table laden with ugly, stuffed gonks, who fought over the privilege of handing round starters or wiping down surfaces under the proud gazes of the grown-ups, whose scrubbed, eager faces and girlish modesty gave me the urge to roll naked in the pigsties shouting obscenities. (*Anita* 148)

The habitus and manners of Meena's well-behaved cousins (who seem to compete for adult attention and adapt well to the traditional demands and female ideals) consist of ambition and intellect ('medals from the debating society'), beauty and sweetness ('gonks on chichi dressing tables'), and devotion to housework and communal approval ('handing round starters and wiping down surfaces'). Meena's urge to counter the extremeness of her cousins by shouting vulgarities in pigsties is the furthest cry from girly dressing tables and devoted obedience to demanding parents. Meena's tomboy personality and dynamics as a child stand in gross contrast to her cousins' seemingly good breeding. The text even suggests that the two girls resemble trained replicas of their mother, Auntie Shaila: "always the same – pleasant, helpful, delicate, groomed, terrifying" (*Anita* 149). Taking after their mother in everything they do, Pinky and Baby embody ridiculous puppets, or, in Henri Bergson's words, inelastic machines worthy of ridicule (14). Bearing in mind that

aggressive derision always recruits supporters against what is being ridiculed (Freud 147), the narrator encourages the reader to laugh at Meena's ludicrous cousins and take stand with Meena's rebellion against the darlings of the Indian community.

Besides images of Meena that counter the ideal of a good Indian daughter, the novel also complicates the notion what constitutes a proper Indian wife. Watching her mother's endless cooking duties, Meena sneeringly concludes that following one's own impulses in an Indian marriage comes close to sabotage, as take-away food that might save some time and effort "would be tantamount to spouse abuse" (*Anita* 61). The self-restraint that Meena's mother takes upon herself in her duties as an Indian spouse is countered by Meena's bewilderment and cynical bite:

> I did not see what was easy about peeling, grinding, kneading, and burning your fingers in this culinary Turkish bath, only to present your masterpiece and have my father wolf it down in ten minutes flat in front of the nine o'clock news whilst sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by spread sheets from yesterday's *Daily Telegraph*. (*Anita* 61 f, emphasis in the original)

Meena admits that her mother's cuisine was "soul food" that her father "needed like air" *(Anita* 61). However, she crushes the romantic and nostalgic importance of Indian food by juxtaposing the amount of effort to the way it is simply taken for granted: after 'peeling, grinding, kneading, and burning your fingers', the food is 'wolfed down'. The narrator also thematizes the self-imposed sacrifice Meena's mother takes upon herself willingly, thus suffocating her emotions and the expression of a free mind. Hosting another enormous party full of relatives, Meena's mother hurls herself into kitchen-work in full pregnancy. When suggested by her husband to cancel the dinner, she replies: "Don't be silly, darling …, [e]veryone is coming. How will it look?" In response to this, Meena comments that "[t]his was one of her favourite get-out clauses, the mantra for her self-imposed martyrdom – what will people think?" (*Anita* 107) Meena's sarcastic comment on her mother's mantra is indicative of the narrative disruption of the ideal that Indian women are asked to obey and bow to communal expectation while swallowing down personal preferences. It is above all the collision between communal domination and expansion of an individual personality that comes under narrative attack in *Anita and Me.* Duty and sacrifice of a housewife in an Indian community is trivialised due to the fact that it is taken for granted by family and relatives. With a dosis of cynicism, the novel tackles communal pressure and female ideals as 'mantras of self-imposed martyrdom'.

Despite Meena's dismissal of what it means to be a female *and* an individual in a traditional community that presides over one's own liberties and duties, her community does not signify a coherent and homogenous group, nor does it base upon absolute solidarity and shared lifestyles. As Bromley argues, "[i]t cannot be assumed … that simply being within a particular diasporic community confers an automatic and common shared identity, as the dimensions of class, gender and sexuality also have to be addressed" (8). Bromley's plea is also reflected in *Anita and Me*: the narrator points to discrepancies between Meena's family and other Indian immigrants that clearly distinguish her parents by class, advancement and a certain lifestyle. Images of more traditional parts of the Indian community in Birmingham represented by women who enforce their traditional saris against the weather collide with Meena's mother's lifestyle:

> The… other Indian women would inevitably be dressed in embroidered *salwar kameez* suits screaming with green and pinks and yellows (incongruous with thick woolly socks squeezed into open-toed sandals and men's cardies over their vibrating thin silks, evil necessities in this damn cold country), with bright make-up and showy gold-plated jewellery which made them look like ambulating Christmas trees. (*Anita* 26, emphasis in the original)

This passage delivers a flamboyant picture of traditional Indian fashion of silk saris with bold colours mismatched by the stumpiness of woolen socks and oversize weather-related cardigans. Indian women are compared with 'Christmas trees' due to their exaggerated make-up and jewellery. Eventually, a comment made by Meena's mother expresses disapproval of her compatriots' lack of taste and suitability by comparing them to overdressed disco goers (*Anita* 26). Clearly her scorn attacks "a flaw, a deformity or incapacity on the part of the butt of the joke" (Ermida 15). What is more, compared to these more traditional women, Mrs. Kumar considers herself to be superior due to her progressiveness and "her M & S separates" (*Anita* 61) that she exchanges for saris only in the seclusion of her private home. Her determination to wear discreet jewellery, tasteful clothes and speak English without Punjabi accent makes her and the traditional Indian women in Birmingham "two rare species who have just found out they are vaguely related" (*Anita* 26). This episode discloses that the Indian community consists of at times almost unrelated individuals. As Meena and her mother signal their distance and mockery of more traditional Indian demeanour, they in fact demonstrate that their community is not a sphere of unified behaviour and thinking. Bromley has already pointed to this stratification of

diasporic communities due to factors such as class, gender or education (8); *Anita and Me* explores what this internal diversification implies for a sense of belonging to and within such communities. Flamboyant saris and exaggerated make-up are only one example of elements that in some individuals create a sense of belonging, recognition, and comfort, and in others (such as Meena and her mother), estrangement and irritation.

Belonging to a diasporic community is not a given by default, nor is belonging a given within one's own immigrant family. Meena's parents may hold an exceptional position within the Indian community due to their class, education and lifestyle. However, they still embody values of first-generation immigrants that Meena struggles to accept. Although they have managed to achieve a modest and passable lifestyle, her parents still remind Meena of immigrant hardships:

> 'We will never be rich, Meena, we're too honest. But we will always have enough to buy all the important things, food, heat, a car...' I began to switch off. I did not want mama to remind me of all the things we had for which I had to be eternally vigilant and grateful, I wanted us to have enough money so that we could be selfish, ungrateful, and spoil ourselves shamelessly without having to do rapid sums in our heads as if we were permanently queueing at some huge check-out till. (*Anita* 262)

The testimony of Meena's mother is yet another of the family's 'litanies' (*Anita* 30) that Meena acts deaf upon with the time. Despite their modest accomplishments since their arrival in Tollington, Meena's parents seem to rewind internalised messages that mirror the hardships of the first-generation immigration. The child is frustrated by their immigrant concerns: Meena's sarcastic response in favour of decadence and the pleasure of spending money contrasts the humility with which her parents appreciate their most basic belongings. Similarly, Campbell-Hall argues that "Meena rejects the reminders of their status as 'others' within the community who value the migrant's dreams of adequate food, shelter, work, and transportation" (297). Once more the narrator uses the force of her imagination to compare her parents' frugality with permanent calculation at a giant check-out; while the dimensions of this check-out are exaggerated, they reflect the omnipresence of economic fears in Meena's family that the child is determined to resist. When it comes to money, Meena's criticism signifies that she has long since abandoned her parents' and any other immigrant's beliefs about money and humility. Instead, Meena prefers to associate herself with the way money and possessions are treated with what she considers must be money-confident mainstream behaviour. If we think

this discrepancy through to the end, Meena's aspirations for wealth reveal a gap in class within her own family: while her parents lead rather undemanding lives, Meena utterly admires the luxury combined with high-profile education in the neighbourhood home of Harrinder P. Singh, a Sikh whom the family meets shortly before they move away from Tollington. The child's ability to recognize the struggles of her family and community (e.g. the fact that they have to save money) does not necessarily mean that she identifies with these struggles or intends to live her parents' life. Instead, Meena sets new parameters of belonging and new lifestyles that she can identify with, even if she has to break with the beliefs and parameters of her immigrant community.

As Bromley correctly points out, *Anita and Me* is a narrative about what he calls a 'new belonging' (2000). While Bromley focuses upon belonging to hybrid spheres, claiming that individuals create new (third) spaces of belonging "beyond existing political, social and cultural binaries" (1), the examples in this section focus upon the question how and to what extent Meena belongs to her Indian family and community. Simply put, this part of my analysis discusses *how* (and not necessarily *where*[40]) Meena belongs and how her (un-)belonging manifests itself in the textual comic portrayals of her family and relatives. Meena's sense of belonging to her kin is not unconditional nor is it absolute. The child-narrator attacks her family's Indian heritage as a cultural corset that limits exploration and individual fulfillment. Whenever she is 'expected to belong' and oblige the rigidness of her family tradition, the text mirrors Meena's resentment by introducing sarcasm and dismissive narratorial comments. However, the comic effects operating in the novel never lead to complete destruction or deformation of the characters in their diasporic environment. As Ranasinha points out, Meena's "portrayals of Asian communities characterised by a warmth and depth make her criticisms more palatable. . . . . [S]he maintains a critique laced with penetrating humour that does not become ironic distance" (260). Whenever the child identifies with Indian role-models such as her Nanima or even Rita Farrier, her recounts are infused with well-tempered humour. In case biting cynicism occurs, it is outbalanced by more sombre passages in which Meena manages to look behind façades of immigrant life. Her Indian kin, though occasionally turned into caricature-like personae, retrieve their sympathetic and more

[40] The question of location and specifics of Meena's beloging is discussed in the section 1.3 of this chapter.

profound human-like features, showing that Meena never leaves her cynicism or her ironical distance unjustified or unbalanced. The quality of the narrator's double-edged humour in *Anita and Me* bears features of the Bachtinian medieval carnivalesque; it is above all its 'ambivalence' (Bachtin 60 f) that shapes Meena's responses to her community. According to Bachtin, the carnival is in as far 'ambivalent' as it never completely stamps to the ground the target of its derision; it is "buoyant and scornful at the same time, it negates and confirms, buries and brings back to life" (61, my translation). I argue that this feature of Bachtinian mockery is manifested in the balanced narrative derision of Meena's kin. While some passages caricaturize the communal experience, others elevate Meena's parents and relatives to new levels of sympathy only to question their conduct once more.

Meena belongs to her kin, but not unconditionally and not all the time. Her strategy of making herself at home in the Indian diaspora is one of balance and critique, which, in *Anita and Me*, appear two valid strategies of domestication. In post-colonial discourse, the idea of home and belonging has to yield to the assumption that making home depends on parameters of cultural rootedness and identity fixity that no longer exist in today's hybridised environments (McLeod, *Beginning* 214). Similarly, Hussain points out that the disruption of home and identity constitute major topoi in post-colonial writing (61). In contrast to that, works of British migrant fiction thematize various strategies of belonging. *Anita and Me* represents an example of 'critical belonging', namely a disposition of empathy paired with critique of one's own family, community and diaspora. This disposition prevents all too favourable portrayals and romantic nostalgia of the homeland, but it also refrains from categorical dismissal of what diasporic communities have to offer as possible sites of belonging.

Related to the question of belonging is also the question of post-colonial agency in *Anita and Me*: does the child-narrator Meena serve as a narrative medium who adequately captures immigrant experience and gives voice to otherwise unheard struggles of the marginalised? If so, then what kind of agency is expressed through the balanced use of comic effects in portraits of her relatives? Post-colonial agency or 'referentiality' excludes critique of those whom the narrator is supposed to advocate. If the post-colonial discourse has been created to emancipate the colonised from Western system of values, mindsets and politics (Ball 3), then post-colonial writing ideally should not reach for strategies that devaluate them. As regards the

appropriate representation of the Indian diaspora in *Anita and Me*, Meena's comic disapproval of her relatives and the community at large is a far cry from unconditional benevolence and ambassadorship for her ethnic group. Instead, what *Anita and Me* points at is that unity, coherence and shared immigrant experience do not exist in diasporic loci, thus belying any unconditional sympathy and solidarity with other non-white migrants (Mercer 251; see also Bromley 8). The novel's use of comic representations reflects exactly *that*: it is conditional, critical, reflecting and understanding. As there is no diaspora unity to which she as the narrator of the story can give her voice, Meena's representation is shaped by comic ambivalence and intervals of distance and affiliation. Consequently, Meena's 'referentiality' or agency is as critical as her sense of belonging.

1.3 Downsides of Hybridity in *Anita and Me*

Anita and Me has received substantial attention from the post-colonial perspective, not least because critics hold that key concepts of the post-colonial paradigm such as Homi Bhabha's hybridity and his notion of a Third Space are central to the constitution of the novel. According to several scholars, at the core of *Anita and Me* lies the post-colonial agenda of creating new hybrid spaces of identification that surmount the hitherto known frames of culture, nation and identity. For Bromley, *Anita and Me* counts among works of diasporic fiction

> which are written from the affective experience of social marginality, from a disjunctive, fragmented, displaced agency, and from the perspective of the edge. Excess, dream and fragment shape these fictions in an attempt to produce an act of reinscribing, of revising and hybridising the settled discursive hierarchies, by constructing a third space beyond existing political, social and cultural binaries: it is a space of revaluation. (Bromley 1)

One has to notice Bromley's adaptation of Bhabha's terminology: the characters in this type of fiction create 'third spaces' in which dominant discourses of nation and culture are hybridised and new identities are promoted.[41] In similar fashion, Nasta draws on the idea of a new 'space' in Syal's novel, "a differently mirrored space, a space which could enable the ironic possibilities of 'double-entendre' and comedy to explode prevailing stereotypes" (188). The narrative construction of such a space enables the author to crush stereotypical images of British Asianhood such as the perpetuation of victimhood in the (hi-)stories of British Asian communities. At the

[41] see also Knopp (2009) and Emig (2010).

same time, this third space offers a unique opportunity for two-way comedy directed both against the white British mainstream and the diasporic group (Nasta 188). Meena's sense of humorous observation from inside this new, third space is considered a vital tool for the promotion of hybridity and contestation of entrenched demarcations of race, nation and ethnicity. Knopp argues that humorous impulses in contact zones between cultures are a narrative tool for negotiating new transcultural British identities and a device of subverting traditional mainstream and minority discourses about identity (65), which is an echo of Bromley's position on the transforming and hybridising power of 'third spaces' in diasporic fiction outlined above. Moreover, operating from one such hybrid third space, Meena occupies a spot in equal distance to both cultures that "allows her to observe both the English and the Indians from a distanced perspective [from which] she can be poignantly humorous about both" (Dunphy 650).

All these critical voices emphasize the importance of hybridity as a dynamic force of cultural alteration. The hybrid individual *and* narrator (in this case, Meena) is assigned the role of a hybridiser and "a critical, and knowing, insider/outsider" (Bromley 144). What is blinded out is that Meena's hybridity is not child's play; one must not forget that Meena epitomizes the hybridity of an individual trapped with an Indian heritage in the English village of Tollington. Critics such as Stein and Schoene-Harwood thematize the negative implications of one such hybrid constellation; for Stein, hybridity in *Anita and Me* remains a critical state of being that continually forces the main protagonist to look for survival strategies in a society that rejects syncretism (52). Schoene-Harwood also highlights Meena's struggle as a hybrid individual in Tollington:

> In Meena's case, hybridity signifies a state of not being able to fully meet the standards of either culture. Meena cannot switch elegantly from authentic Indianness to authentic Englishness and back, but is caught up in a never-ending series of only ever imperfectly accomplished processes of translation, which render her a foreign presence in the outside world as well as at home. ("Beyond (T)race" 161 f)

The discomfort and irritation that arises from hybridity in an otherwise highly essentialist environment is also visible in Meena's experiences and encounters. Her struggles to mingle two cultures lead to 'only ever imperfectly accomplished processes of translation'. In other words, Meena's hybridity is not an undisputed strategy of navigation between cultures, it is often enough a cul-de-sac: Meena's attempts to translate, transform and hybridize her environment create more than once

situations of cultural collision and misunderstanding. What is more, as the only hybrid being who enters and inhabits both the Indian and the local culture, Meena stands alone among the villagers of Tollington. Her loneliness urges her to look for allies who will offer her a haven of self-recognition. Interestingly enough, Meena finds accomplices both in her Nanima from India *and* 'the Tollington wrench' Anita Rutter. In the course of this section, I will argue that Meena's hybridity is a state of such disorientation and isolation that the child's priority is not to hybridize her environment but to find enough points of reference that assist her in creating a sense of belonging and a better understanding of her own self. Put more simply, *Anita and Me* is a novel about hybrid individuals wanting to belong.

In this novel, hybridity *can* serve as a tactics to achieve a state of belonging. Both Hussain and Bromley point to this conclusion, thus moving beyond Bhabha's post-colonial notion of hybridity and Third Space where an individual is "neither One nor the Other" but an intermediate being inhabiting an in-between Third Space that makes belonging to either side impossible (219). For Bromley, hybridity and belonging go hand in hand; and, since hybridity overcomes categories of nation and culture as 'old' frameworks of belonging, it is a strategy that allows for a "possible condition of belonging simultaneously, mentally, psychologically and experientally, to a diversity of cultures" (Bromley 7). Hussain has a similar approach to hybridity and belonging as an interplay of an individual's desire to belong and hybridity as a strategy that facilitates "an active sense of self from both the cultures into which [hybrid individuals] are born and a desire for location within both" (61). As both critics acknowledge the need of hybrid individuals to draw from all the cultures they find themselves in with the intent to domesticate all of them as their own, they depart from post-colonial perspectives on belonging as a concept virtually incompatible with hybrid identities and hybridised environments. *Anita and Me* certainly is a novel about belonging; yet it questions hybridity as one and the only undisputed technique with which belonging to several contexts can be accomplished. Many times in this novel, Meena's hybridity is a condition that creates misunderstandings and disruption, thus in fact being the very cause of unbelonging as a state that it is meant to overcome. Several of the following examples serve to illustrate this downside of hybridity. It is therefore safe to argue that in *Anita and Me*, hybridity is a concept treated with caution. The comic impulses in the narrative enhance the hazardous nature of hybridity located between highly hermetic contexts of the mining village of

Tollington and the middle-class habitat of an Indian family. With the help of comic impulses, *Anita and Me* draws a parade of hybridity failures, situations of cultural collision and disruption and unsuccessful attempts of cultural translation. At the same time, its narrator Meena is eager to belong to both cultures at any cost.

The comic potential within the novel lies many times in the hybrid and culturally incongruous encounters in which Meena finds herself. What the comic effects uncover is that hybridised environments in *Anita and Me* by no means represent spaces of tolerance, recognition or even the will to get involved with another culture. The comic impulses in grey areas between the Indian and the English culture rather point to collision, misdirection and a lack of sense. They also demonstrate the discomfort and disruption of a hybrid individual and prove that hybridity in *Anita and Me* is by no means an unquestioned and convenient concept. One of the more prominent examples is Meena's introduction of English backyard slang in front of her parents and all her relatives. Having completed her *Top of the Pops* performance at a family reunion, Meena stumbles into a major family conflict:

> "'It's my all time favourite song at the moment,' and then [I] added, 'It's so brilliant I could shag the arse off it.' There was a sudden terrible intake of breath and then complete silence, broken only by the harmonium emitting a death rattle as papa's fingers fell off the keys. In a split second, my beaming admirers had become parodies of Hindi film villains, with flared nostrils, bulging eyes and quivering, outraged eyebrows. They only needed twirling moustaches and pot bellies straining at a bullet laden belt to complete the sense of overwhelming menace that now surrounded me. In my dizzy state, I fancied I saw Anita Rutter perched on a dodgem car with a fag hanging out of her mouth, and laughing in reverberated echo as the heavens slowly crumbled and fell in blue jagged lumps around her. (*Anita* 115)

The nature of this scene appears very filmic and visual: the silence after Meena's failed punchline is the quiet before the storm of her family's horror and indignation. The episode culminates in Meena's horrific vision of being haunted by her relatives as Hindi villains while Anita Rutter is amused by the entire incident. As Emig reminds us, the comic potential in *Anita and Me* feeds upon the the combination of humour and the visual effects of television (182). It is once more a child's imagination that produces incongruous images, this time menacing and comic at the same time. Here the unification of a threatening tribunal of Indian relatives with Anita Rutter as a sneering witness of the scene is a far cry from the playful images Meena has had while visualising her grandparents and Rita Farrier. Instead, her uncles and Aunties are portrayed as parodies of villains from Hindi films (which is

another reference to imagery on television screen). Evoking exaggerated Bollywood images, the narrator amplifies but also travesties the rage of her family. The outrage she has caused and the sudden revelation that Anita has taught her a vulgarism Meena has considered harmless (*Anita* 106) develops its full dimension in the comic collision of Hindi villains chasing Meena while Anita laughs with *schadenfreude*. At first sight, this example appears to show what Emig criticizes as a limitation of this novel and hybrid humour in general: "The limits of hybrid humour can be seen in the appropriation of clichés and stereotypes in and as jokes", as the use of comic stereotypes for the sake of entertainment does little to sharpen the political message or critical potential of the text (Emig 169). However, to pinpoint stereotypes as jokes without regard to the context of their occurrence is to reduce passages like this to their entertaining potential. I would like to point to the sub-level beneath the comic, namely the fact that Meena is faced with the consequences of her hybrid identity. She has well-meaningly and confidently used what she considers an appropriate English slang expression in an environment that openly despises the English vernacular. Her mother warns her on several occasions that "[j]ust because the English can't speak English themselves, does not mean you have to talk like an urchin. . . . . You'll be swearing and urinating in telephone boxes next" (*Anita* 53). Meena has not only intruded the Indian family domain with an English expression, she has also violated the borders of class by agitating "the 'super-civilised' world of her strict middle-class parents" (Hussain 122) with Tollington's working-class vulgarisms. Meena's inter-cultural position is thus furthermore complicated by class awareness and class distinction. Consequently, the hybrid child is confronted with public embarrassment and condemnation of her parents and the entire community. This passage poignantly confirms the aforementioned statements made by Schoene-Harwood (1999) and Stein (2004) that hybridity in *Anita and Me* is a challenging state of being.

Meena's efforts to introduce the Englishness of the outside world to her parents' home culminate in the episode when her backyard peer and admired idol Anita Rutter comes to visit for dinner. This intrusion of the "first non-relative" and "white person" (*Anita* 254) into the Indian privacy of the Kumar family transforms their place into a new intercultural ground, a hybrid zone where every ethnic marker or gesture is negotiated and put into question. Needless to say that this contact zone between Meena, her parents and Anita also represents a potential minefield of misunderstandings that allow for comic encounters. Again, the scenery is dominated

by mutual awe and confusion. The comic potential of the scene can only be fully enjoyed by the reader as the protagonists involved enter unexplored and wavering ground. For the first time, the entire Kumar family sits down at a table with their guest, as, being an Indian family, they "usually ate in shifts" (*Anita* 252). Meena is anxious do give her mother instructions on how to receive an English guest properly, as the English supposedly enjoy conversation while having dinner. It is Anita herself who violates these alleged English manners:

> Any romantic idea I had about witty stories over the dinner table disappeared when Anita made a fortress of her arms and chewed stolidly behind it, daring anyone to approach and disturb her concentration or risk losing an eye if they attempted to steal a chip. (*Anita* 253)

As it turns out, Anita Rutter is *not* the personification of alleged English social graces shoveling the food greedily into her mouth and showing little interest in conversation. Up until that moment, the reader has been given sufficient textual guidance about Anita's conduct and her obvious lack of manners. She is the 'cock of the yard' "with a mixture of pre-pubescent feminine wiles, pouting, sulking, clumsy cack-handed flirting and unsettling mood swings which would often end in minor violence" (*Anita* 39). What is potentially amusing is Meena's determination to have a 'proper' English dinner with an English guest who obviously lacks all the manners and virtues required for that occasion. Naturally, Meena's naivety and idealization of English politeness is crushed; as the rest of the Tollington community, Anita is "part of a thwarted and blunted class fraction, powerless, excluded and marginalised: her name, Rutter, defining and confining her future" (Bromley 146). Being a far cry from the myth of English nobleness, the portrayal of Anita Rutter reveals one agenda in *Anita and Me*, namely the comic subversion of English stereotypes[42] (Bromley 145). What is more, the novel expands the hybrid interspace between cultures by adding dimensions of class and education. While Meena and her non-white, Indian immigrant parents embody middle-class civility and educational aspirations, the white working-class inhabitants of Tollington are stuck in a treadmill of lower-class backwardness (Stein 37).

How little the members of the two cultures know each other and how little they are ready to accept each other in this allegedly hybridised environment becomes even

[42] Even Syal herself specifies the artistic agenda of her work as "*the pleasure of exploding stereotypes*" (qtd. in Nasta 173, emphasis in the original).

more obvious in the course of the dinner. As the cultural collisions of the dinner continue, the attenders are captured in an image of mutual bewilderment.

> [Anita] looked up only twice, once when my parents began eating, as always, with their fingers, using their chapatti as scoops to ferry the banquet of curries into their mouths. Anita stopped in mid-chew, looking from her knife and fork to mama and papa's fingers with faint disgust, apparently unaware that all of us had a great view of a lump of half masticated fishfinger sitting on her tongue. (*Anita* 253 f)

This passage exemplifies the use of farcical[43] elements. The comic effect is composed by a reflection of table manners and eating habits and the responses of the characters involved. The Kumars 'ferry' their curries with their fingers into their mouths, a discovery that leaves Anita with 'faint disgust' and open-mouthed, offering in turn a repellent sight of the contents of her meal to the Indian family. The mutual bewilderment is reflected back and forth and the comic potential of this view is increased by the naivety of Anita's indignation. Freud points to the comic naivety of individuals who are fully convinced of the 'normality' of their actions while at the same tame being unaware of their absurdity (197). In the cross-cultural contact zone at the Kumars' dinner table, even the eating habits represent a bewildering (and at times disgusting) disparity. The unsuspecting confidence with which the characters ingest their food is contrasted by the repulsion this evokes in their vis-à-vis. The parties involved have never questioned their eating manners because of the self-evidence with which they display them in an exclusively familiar environment. It is on the shaky ground of cross-cultural encounter that the bewilderment and the disgust of their counterpart is reversed back to them. Being the person responsible for the collision of these two worlds at her parents' house, Meena finds herself in a highly delicate position of permanent translation between her Indian parents and her English peer. The success of this translation is questionable: Meena lies to Anita about the cutlery habits of her family (eating 'with fingers like in all the top restaurants' (*Anita* 254)) and about her Nanima's open disapproval of their guest ('she is glad to meet my mates' (*Anita* 255)). Most important of all, Meena is not invited back to Anita's house. Her effort to hybridize two separate worlds has ended in a spiral of cultural misunderstandings and it is only through the lens of time and

[43] Murfin and Ray define farce as a "type of low comedy that employs improbable or otherwise ridiculous situations and mix-ups, slapstick and horseplay, and crude and even bawdy dialogue. The humor in a farce is by no means subtle; it smacks the audience full-force in the face, aiming simply to entertain and evoke guffaws from the audience" (120).

maturity that the adult narrator Meena can look back on these cultural collisions with amusement. Instances like these show that the transforming power of a hybrid 'third space' (Bromley 2000) does not necessarily create an atmosphere of successful cultural mingling. Meena's attempt to function as an inter-cultural bridge between Anita and her parents only results in mutual bewilderment and it is questionable whether a hybrid individual can truly accomplish this task between two contexts that are in essence hermetic and prejudiced against each other.

Meena's unique position as a hybrid individual in Tollington is detrimental to her desire to find like-minded and equally hybrid spirits. The child-narrator eventually comes to realize that due to her hybridity, she is susceptible to attacks and critique from all sides:

> I always got told off, but I was beginning not to care. I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench, but living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home. (*Anita* 149 f)

Meena's epiphany does not radiate enthusiasm over her in-between status. Rather, it resembles sarcastic resignation ('I was beginning not to care'). Seeing herself from the perspective of all those who think that she is 'a freak of some kind', Meena comes to the conclusion that the 'grey area' of unbelonging to either culture is the dwelling place that is left to her. Critics such as Dunphy admit that Meena's hybrid position certainly enables her to operate from outside and "poke … fun at both communities, but only in her own mind, only to the reader, for being-in-between it is not easy for her to find anyone to laugh with" (651). Many times the child's hybridity grants her cultural insights that only Meena is able to comprehend or enjoy. Humour is illustrative of this: jokes and laughter act as important markers of a shared sense of humour that is based upon shared knowledge resources and shared cultural or social backgrounds. As Dieter Berger points out, shared identities and social values of a group, a religion or a nation build the foundation upon which a shared sense of humour is possible. Incongruities that strike us as funny differ from culture to culture and depend on shared cognitive information. Moreover, non-members of the group are excluded by their lack of understanding of what comic impulse has actually driven the group to join in laughter (D. Berger 2 f). Meena as a hybrid individual between two worlds often runs aground at her attempts to communicate jokes and laughter across cultural borders. Interestingly enough, Meena's first memories consist of both 'getting a joke' and the realization that those around her

have not been able to share her laughter:

> My earliest memory, in fact, is of the first time I understood the punchline to a joke [on English television]. . . . . My mother said I laughed so much that I threw up and at one point, called in Mrs Worrall from next door who put her teeth in and solemnly declared that I'd probably 'had a turn.' (*Anita* 10)

Meena's delight at the right interpretation of a joke is resolved in her excessive laughter that in turn is not understood by her Indian mother nor her English neighbour. Meena's mother is puzzled at best, while Mrs Worrall misinterprets Meena's laughter as a sickness that must have come upon the child. Meena's ability to laugh proves that she is an individual who understands sufficient cultural references to share the sense of humour established on mainstream television. Simultaneously, the child is excluded from both her mother's bewilderment and her neighbour's lack of humour; Meena is a hybrid, and lonely laugher. The child-narrator is well aware of her ambiguity. Shortly after this anecdote she declares that "I've always been a sucker for a good double entendre; the gap between what is said and what is thought, what is stated and what is implied, is a place in which I have always found myself" (*Anita* 10). Meena's hybridity manifests itself in double entendres that enable the child to laugh while everyone else remains unaffected. Her hybrid competence to 'get jokes' however, excludes her from the rest of her environment.

In *Anita and Me*, the misunderstanding of a joke represents misunderstanding the cultural references and incongruities the joke is based upon. Meena is the only character that attempts and fails to translate jokes into different cultural spheres. Family jokes which 'work' within the domestic sphere of her Indian home lose their comic potential when transferred to Meena's English schoolyard, as the following example shows:

> The soothsayer [on Frankie Howerd's *Up Pompeii*] was depicted as an old wild-eyed woman dressed in rags who began every entrance with the litany, 'Woe! Woe! And thrice Woe!' This never ceased to crease me up because *Wo Wo* was our Punjabi family euphemism for shit. . . . . The first time I'd heard the soothsayer's lament I'd said, 'I think she must have constipation!' which made my papa laugh proudly and my mother hide her smile under an expression of distaste. When I repeated the joke in the playground the next day, I realised it lost a lot in translation and vowed I would swot up on a few English jokes before I undertook challenging Vernon Cartwright again for the title of school wit. (*Anita* 56)

The 'Punjabi family euphemism' punchline only seems to have an effect in the private sphere of the Kumar family where it does not require further explanation.

Meena's remark upon the soothsayer's entrance is fully understood by her parents, which implies that the Kumars have established what Henri Bergson calls a "complicity … with other laughers" (5). However, the very same passage reveals what Bergson equally holds to be true: "[H]ow often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group!" (5) Meena's hybridity is restrained when she tries to share with her English peers a punchline strongly tied to specific cultural knowledge. Again, if the sender and the recipient of a joke do not share a "basis of a set of codes and norms that are implicitly shared by the two poles" (Ermida 133), the humorous communication will fail. Meena realizes that she will have to learn English jokes first in order to impress her friends. Her hybridity may have enabled her to generate humour where no humour has been intended in the first place ('Woe! Woe!' as '*Wo Wo*'), but her sense of humour is specific in its 'hybridness' and therefore requires 'hybrid knowledge' and shared appreciation of references from both cultures. As regards humour and translation of jokes, Meena has to experience that even hybrid jokes cement borders between individuals that cannot be overcome by explanation. Moving in and out of context as a hybrid individual is a difficult thing as Meena learns that she has to memorize a couple of English jokes to impress her mates. This example shows that hybridisation (in this case, of a shared sense of humour) passes unheeded in spheres that are rigidly marked in their ways of communication. The hybrid individual fails at hybridising an entirely hermetic environment but has to fall back on adoption of fixed cultural markers instead of making herself heard and understood. In this case, Meena is the only laugher because she is hybrid; in other episodes she cannot join in the laughter *because* of her hybrid status.

In a conversation with her mother, Meena has to discover that in Indian culture, irony is employed differently than in English culture. Mrs. Kumar is enraged by the way English children treat their parents when they grow up and laments the poor family ties in a neighbour family:

> [M]ama told me, with a snort of disgust, that [Mrs Christmas] had three grown-up sons and a few grandchildren also. 'But I've never seen them! Do they live far away?' I persisted. 'Oh yes, very far. Wolverhampton!' she quipped back. It had seemed quite a long way to me when we had driven there for my birthday treat, but I guessed by my mother's flaring nostrils and exaggerated eyebrow movements that she was being ironic, the way Indians are ironic, signposting the joke with a map and compass to the punchline. (*Anita* 58)

Meena's hybrid position allows for her comprehensive view of the way humorous mechanisms operate in Indian and Western culture. In this case, Meena senses differences in the use of irony in those two cultural contexts. In Western culture, writing and speech, irony is known as "a figure of speech which conveys the opposite of what is said. . . . [I]t constitutes a useful argumentative weapon, as it allows subtle and indirect attacks, through which the speaker can conceal his true thoughts while belittling his hearer" (Ermida 12). In other words, irony is characterised by subtlety and covert scorn. Indian irony, as Meena finds out, is more concerned about the transparency of the ironic remark and the unambiguousness with which the target of the remark is attacked. And yet, Meena merely identifies the qualities of her mother's humour, but does not join her mother in the ironic derision of the English. In this case, the comic potential of Meena's portrayal can only be perceived by the reader; that Meena herself does not laugh or join her mother in her ironic dismissal of the English proves that, in Bergson's terms, the 'conspiracy of laughers' (Bergson 5) that ideally should have been established, has failed. According to Reichl and Stein, accessing the comic potential of several cultures is a "'test case' … not for cultural belonging, but for transcultural competence" (14). Accordingly, Meena's hybridity represents one such skill of understanding irony in both Indian and English culture. However, in *Anita and Me*, understanding humour from this 'transculturally competent', hybrid point of view excludes the enjoyment of it. Meena's sense of humour is a proof of her capability to identify the specificity of comic effects in English and Indian context. Yet, it also represents her uniqueness and separation from the laughing communities.

Being hybrid in *Anita and Me* means cultural apprehension and insight, but it also means unbelonging and loneliness, conditions which implant in Meena a nervous itch of attaching herself to contexts of which she believes they will deliver her from alienation. Shared laughter plays a vital role in Meena's efforts to belong. Unlike Reichl and Stein, I therefore argue that shared sense of humour indeed represents 'cultural belonging' for the child, as it does not only suffice for Meena to intellectually understand Indian or English humour, but to truly appreciate situations where laughter establishes a bond of belonging between those who share it. In other words, Meena's laughing accomplices are also those characters who offer her brief periods of belonging rooted in situations of common appreciation of humour.

Astoundingly enough, it is two entirely opposite characters Meena is able to enjoy herself with: Nanima and Anita. The narrator clearly gives us clues about Meena's delight with and over her grandmother. At their first encounter, Meena's father reprehends his daughter not to "titter like that, [and] have some respect" in Nanima's presence (*Anita* 200), and yet Meena is fascinated and exhilarated by her snoring, farting, burping, and above all unrestrained grandmother. As they share the same bed, Nanima's flatulence makes Meena "collapse into a fit of giggles which I had to stifle into my pillow" (*Anita* 207). Moments like these come full circle to the bond between humour and belonging as Meena's laughter is followed by her description of the safety and softness of her grandmother's body, a "yeasty and safe" place where Meena literally finds shelter (*Anita* 207). As these passages show, belonging, and mutual recognition of their personalities are the commonalities that unite Meena and her Nanima in their humorous complicity.

Likewise, Meena has to confess that her admiration for Anita partly derives from Anita's capability to make her laugh.

> … I never had to force my admiration, it flowed from every pore because Anita made me laugh like no one else; she gave voice to all the wicked things I had often thought but kept zipped up inside my good girl's winter coat. Her irreverence was high summer for me, it made me shed inhibitions like woollen layers until I felt naked and slightly embarrassed at the sound of my joy. (*Anita* 138 f)

Anita's sense of humour is deeply derisive and hostile; yet, it appears that her disrespect of others is a liberating force for Meena, as she finds herself laughing at things and people with a joy that she would have never allowed herself in the highly cautious and civilised environment of her parents' home. The emotional release caused by Meena's amusement reflects what Leon Rappoport believes makes aggressive humour enjoyable: "Such humor frees us, however momentarily, from the weight of our efforts to be properly respectable and good. It gives us license to be spontaneously bad, to violate the rules of conventional morality" (xiii). It is obvious that Meena's laughter is objectionable and inappropriate in the more traditional Indian environment where all the expectations lie on her respectability and manners as a good Indian daughter. Even Meena herself is surprised and somewhat uncomfortable about her own amusement. However, what prevails is Meena's realization that by laughing at things that are inappropriate, she slowly gains a new (and liberating) perspective on how far an individual allows herself to cross borders of morality and decency. Anita tells Meena disparaging jokes about a neighbour's

catheter and disease that Meena finds entertaining despite the fact that she knows the neighbour very well (*Anita* 139). Shared and aggressive derision strengthens the bond between Meena and Anita up to the point of Meena's awareness that she would "wait enthralled for the next revelation, each one tilting my small world slightly off its axis so I saw the familiar and the mundane through new cynical eyes, Anita's eyes" (*Anita* 139). To dismiss the fact that Meena enjoys Anita's cynicism as tasteless and improper seems rather a limited approach. Meena's pleasure at Anita's lack of restraint is an aspect of her personality exposed in an environment where self-censorship is abolished. As Dunphy puts it, "[i]t would be too simple to say that Anita is a bad influence on Meena, for Meena clearly wants this influence. Rather, Meena projects fantasies and frustrations onto Anita, using her to overcome her own insecurities" (642). Meena admits the recognition of her inner self around Anita, as she is never judged or censored by her peer:

> … Anita never looked at me the way my adopted female cousins did; there was never fear or censure or recoil in those green, cool eyes, only the recognition of a kindred spirit, another mad bad girl trapped inside a superficially obedient body. In fact, sometimes when I looked into her eyes, all I could see and cling to was my own questioning reflection. (*Anita* 150)

Meena's deepest inclinations and biases are unearthed and acknowledged with the help of Anita's sense of humour. In this respect, giving in to merriment of provocative and controversial humour contributes to Meena's growing self-awareness and self-revelation. With the help of Anita's humour, Meena learns about herself by becoming conscious of borders that mark decency, morality, and judgment of others. Rappoport calls this process the "'joy of transgression,' yet combined with a more subtle joy of transcendence" (xiii), an aspect crucial for Meena's development and emancipation.

Meena's hybrid sense of humour is two-sided. It swings back and forth between harmless slapstick and horseplay shared with her Nanima and her secret enjoyment of ridiculing others with Anita. Both opposite poles reflect aspects of Meena's personality and development as Meena's hybrid identity is split between belonging and conciliation and breaking the rules imposed upon her by her Indian family. The fact that she can laugh with Nanima *and* Anita vividly illustrates the antagonistic disposition of Meena's identity. The fact that the child needs both Nanima and Anita to gain a better understanding of herself shows that hybridity by birth does not automatically imply a hybrid, all-comprehensive sense of the world

and oneself. In fact, due to her hybridity, Meena reaches for opposite points of reference such as Nanima and Anita (who, in a given moment of their meeting, show hardly any understanding of each other) to find a place in the world and to belong.

What is problematic about Nanima and Anita is that they both stand for what Bromley refers to as "the rootedness of old, hollowed-out belongings" (4): Anita Rutter is a "terminus identity" (Bromley 146) that represents Tollington's estate council youth deprived of any prospects for the future, while Meena's Nanima embodies a "retreat to an older sense of belonging" (Gunning 148) to the traditional homeland of India that Gunning finds equally objectionable. Meena's bond with Anita and Nanima prompts the question that is highly problematic in post-colonial discourse: the belonging of a hybrid individual to fixed cultural contexts and making sense of a hybrid self with the help of fixed parameters of identity. From the post-colonial perspective, hybrid identities inhabit a Third Space that represents a constant and fluid challenge to the cultural meanings and symbols that mark out preconceived categories of belonging. Bhabha argues that it is up to the hybrid individual to transform and re-interpret these symbols and categories (37). Put more simply, adaptation and affiliation with rigid systems of belonging are out of place for a hybrid individual. However, even Bhabha acknowledges that the fluctuating and inconclusive nature of the Third Space evokes the feeling of an 'unhomely world' that drives the in-between individual to conjoin:

> To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalencies and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity: 'I am looking for the join... I want to join... I want to join.' (Bhabha 18).

The hybrid Meena 'ad-joins' Anita and Nanima, two fixed points of cultural reference and orientation – and she succeeds. Many critics readily acknowledge Meena's upward mobility *and* a better understanding of her self (e.g. Bromley 2000; Stein 2004). Yet, we need to take into account that this development has taken place with Meena's appropriation of firm frames of belonging. What *Anita and Me* demonstrates is that, in their efforts to belong and make sense of the world and oneself, hybrid individuals *can* reach for fixed categories of belonging such as roots, language, accent, friendships and family ties, thus pointing out that being hybrid does not mean to either categorically dismiss or constantly change markers of race, culture, or even class. As with racism and belonging, the novel takes a critical, yet constructive approach to the orientation that rigid systems of reference have to offer. Meena needs

Anita to find out about herself (Dunphy 642), but in a sense, she also needs Anita to overcome Anita. Meena's friendship with the white 'Tollington wrench' has lead to her realization that this friendship is no longer needed and could have led to an equally miserable existence with "all [my] potential, all that hope, all gone because I made friends once with Anita Rutter" (*Anita* 322). Bromley also points to Meena's epiphany, but he does not consider the necessity of this friendship for Meena's positive self-realization and recognition of new liberties that Anita Rutter has been able to offer. Meena's newly acquired knowledge of India and her relationship with her grandmother helps her to stand on firm ground in Tollington's atmosphere of suspicion of others (Bromley 143), and, in the course of events, this new bond is strengthened.

Meena as a hybrid individual reaches for categories and markers of 'old' belonging, thus clearly violating the post-colonial hybrid condition in which subjects constantly change and re-negotiate conventional frames of meaning and orientation. Instead, the child grows with every point of orientation to higher levels of self-understanding. Some alliances with family relatives and images of homeland India are kept alive; others (as the friendship with Anita) are abandoned for their destructiveness. Yet on the whole, culture, language, family ties and history have not lost their explanatory power nor forsaken their potential to offer hybrid individuals a sense of belonging and successful navigation through hybridised contexts.

1.4 Conclusion: Comic Balance and Critical Belonging in *Anita and Me*

Two agendas of British migrant fiction define the focus of *Anita and Me*, namely the re-evaluation of something 'old' and the promotion of something 'new'. As is the case with all the novels under survey, comic impulses fulfil vital and versatile functions in the textual guidance of the reader away from established and towards novel perspectives. Without a doubt, *Anita and Me* addresses notorious post-colonial concerns and concepts. Thanks to its comic tone, the novel takes a new course in post-colonial matters such as racism, agency, hybridity and belonging. Overall, it is safe to argue that the novel's comic tone is critical, yet balanced. Passages informed with outright derision and dismissals are balanced out by passages of either serious understanding or comic reconciliation. This approach results in critical and sober-minded portrayals of racism in Tollington that do not allow for simplistic conclusions. Despite the fact that racism lurks behind every corner, *Anita and Me*

engages in highlighting the human motives of the villagers and the social and economic decay of the local community that only catalyze xenophobic resentments. What is more, in *Anita and Me*, the dismissal of the 'Other' is not an all-white phenomenon. The novel unconvers tendencies of racial hatred and ethnic derision in her own community of origin, and eventually, in Meena herself. What the textual hints and comic effects signal is that racism and hatred are conditioned by social and economic hardships and by the inability to recognize the human beings behind labels and techniques of 'Othering'. Unlike the post-colonial mode of 'oppositionality', the novel's tendency is that of balanced critique and understanding that puts 'Othering' and hostility into perspective as a compensation for human fears and social deficiencies. Whereas post-colonial writing favours 'referentiality' and agency for the marginalised, *Anita and Me* contains elements of 'ambivalent' Bachtinian mockery that result in the subversion *and* the renewal of the targeted subject or issue. Despite the comic disruption of Indian traditionalism and immigrant mentality, Meena's belonging to her community is never out of sight. It is ambivalent and critical, as is the overall aggressive *and* affiliative tone of the comic effects that accompany Meena's narrative portrayals of (un-)belonging.

Meena's hybridity in *Anita and Me* contravenes the post-colonial understanding of hybridity as a state of being outside conventional parameters of belonging. The child adopts and grows with newly established family ties with her Nanima and her friendship with Anita. Once more does the duality of the comic help to put hybridity and belonging into a new perspective: traditional frameworks of belonging such as awareness of traditional cultural heritage or adaptation to local working-class youth serve as valuable springboards for a better understanding of the self within hybrid characters such as Meena. Fixed cultural markers are used and appreciated when they assist the hybrid individual in the creation of a sense of belonging – and dismissed, when they cause further unbelonging.

2. Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

In 1990, after a decade of successful screenplays, Hanif Kureishi made his debut as a novelist with the publication of *The Buddha of Suburbia*. This novel was hailed for its comedic spirit as being "utterly irreverent and wildly improper, …

genuinely touching and truthful [and] very funny indeed" (Salman Rushdie)[44]. Critics agree that many of the events in the novel mirror Kureishi's own life as a mixed-race teenager and young artist in London (Jones 98; Ranasinha 230). The hero of the novel and its first-person narrator is Karim Amir, a quixotic 17-year-old stranded in the monotony of the London suburbia. Born to an English mother and an Indian father, Karim bears the hardships of an adolescent desperate to get hold of the dazzling adventures the London metropolis of the 1970s holds in store. However, Karim's career as a young actor in London's theatre scene is complicated by racist abuse, patronising directors and the struggle for success at any cost. His bi-sexual explorations and relationships are stirred up by setbacks and emotional abuse. As Karim's family ties are likewise turned inside out, his family offers little relief for their offspring's anxieties. His father Haroon undergoes a major transformation, quitting his 9 to 5 job as a civil servant for his new call as the 'Buddha of suburbia', a self-made guru worshipped by the white middle class who are obsessed with Eastern exoticism. Leaving his old profession for a more exciting life, Karim's father eventually also leaves his plain wife Margaret for his eccentric new lover, Eva Kay. Troubled by family drama, unrequited love and his career ventures in the big city of London, Karim faces the hypocrisy and inconsistency inherent to all human beings.

More than the other two novels under examination, *The Buddha of Suburbia* has been approached through the post-colonial lens and declared as a post-colonial piece of writing. The novel's focus on race, identity and what it means to be "half-caste in England" (*The Buddha* 141) has dictated its reception while Kureishi has – rather involuntarily – earned himself the title of a 'postcolonial storyteller' (Kaleta 1998). As one might expect, the comic elements in *The Buddha* have been interpreted along these post-colonial lines. Strategies such as irony or vulgarism in the novel have been perceived as Karim's verbal resistance tools against the oppressions enforced upon him by the white British majority culture. In my approach to comic effects in Kureishi's novel, I will adopt the new course that Bruce King has called for in the very first epigraph to this study, stating that the current evolution of literary fiction often surpasses the post-colonial directive and thus necessitates a continuum of fresh vantage points (85). Along King's line of argument, I will substantiate my proposal that *The Buddha of Suburbia* in fact reconsiders and positions itself *against*

[44] qtd. on the paperback of the Faber and Faber edition of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990).

notorious post-colonial concerns and breaks away from this discourse towards what Misrahi-Barak calls "new roots" (94).

Another controversy in the reception of Kureishi's work is the aforementioned 'burden of representation' as a public expectation imposed upon writers to represent their communities vis-à-vis the mainstream culture and to offer adequate portrayals of minority experience (Mercer 235; Ranasinha 6). Even before the publication of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi found himself in the crossfire of politics of representation and minority interests. In an interview with MacCabe, Kureishi disclaims appropriate portrayals of Asian ethnicity in his fiction as well as any ambassadorship on behalf of the British Asian community: "If other people think Asians should be represented in a certain way, then they can write their own stories" (qtd. in Yousaf 10). Kureishi's criticism resonates throughout the novel. It finds expression in the derisive tone of the textual fabric of the novel; the comic treatment of communal expectations and at times farcical portrayals of Asian characters reflect Kureishi's refusal to serve as an 'ethnic' writer and the poster child of the British-Asian community.

The comic effects in *The Buddha* do not only serve to satirize and oppose labels such as 'post-colonial writer' or 'ambassador of ethnicity'. The novel also promotes a new world-view independent of post-colonial agendas and minority interests. It is a premise of my study that via comic effects in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kureishi consolidates his reputation as a universalist writer as opposed to a strictly post-colonial writer. Accordingly, comic impulses in his novel serve as a narrative instrument of attacking everyone in the wide spectrum of the novel's cast, thus revealing that, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the whole of human condition is troublesome and "slightly ridiculous" (*The Buddha* 10).

2.1 'Oppositionality' Reconsidered: Karim as a 'Post-Colonial Anti-Hero'

When I see the word 'post-colonial', I always reach for my machine gun.

- Hanif Kureishi[45]

What Kureishi humorously aims at in the above epigraph is the academic and public persistence to place his oeuvre within post-colonial fiction. Despite Kureishi's

[45] Kureishi's comment in an unpublished interview with Susan Fischer at the conference "In Analysis: The Work of Hanif Kureishi" held at the Roehampton University in London on February 25th 2012.

disapprobation of the post-colonial approach to his work, his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* has received significant attention from post-colonial critics. Many of them highlight both Kureishi's opposition to standardised literary canons and narratives and the novel's main protagonist's flamboyant rhetoric which attacks well-established authorities and traces of imperialist legacy in London's society of the 1970s. Winkgens' approach to Kureishi's work mirrors in every respect the two post-colonial criteria of 'oppositionality' and 'referentiality' (Ball 2009). From Winkgens' perspective, Kureishi subverts both the traditional hierarchical oppositions of centre and periphery and asymmetrical relationships between the coloniser and the colonised, thus also helping the marginalised post-colonial 'Other' to find a voice to articulate their new-found identity (174). For Carey, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is "resistance literature" (123); as Karim Amir employs the vulgar rhetoric of the low culture and plays with standardised English diction, he subverts both high-culture authority and the presence of colonial legacy in the British society (Carey 124 f). Holmes also highlights the subversive potential of Karim's foul-mouthed language in the wake of social injustice and disenfranchisement: "Alienated from the British mainstream as a frequent victim of racism, Karim is sensitive to the ways in which the behaviour of individuals reflects corrupt and unfair social institutions and mores" (Holmes 647). From Holmes' perspective, Karim's vulgarity as a narrator is a subversive instrument against the "bourgeois canons of propriety and decency" (647). Similarly, Allison and Curry propose that Karim utilizes elements of sarcasm and parody to compensate for his own lack of agency. The critics interpret Karim's scorn as a more or less toothless opposition of a marginalised individual who cannot afford to rage against "the systems of injustice" and "his own inability to recast himself out of non-stereotypical roles" (Allison and Curry 162).

As these critical voices show, Karim's scoffing narrative tone is considered a reflection of his post-colonial opposition against racism and neo-colonial tendencies. However, other critics argue that Karim's cocky and flamboyant observations disqualify him as a representative of the post-colonial condition *and* Kureishi as a post-colonial writer. Kaleta points out that Kureishi's sense of humour and his far-sighted view of mankind is provocative for critics (16) – and for post-colonial critics in particular. It is interesting to observe that the more scholars find faults with Kureishi's allegedly post-colonial writing, the more obvious it becomes that Kureishi has never intended to satisfy post-colonial criteria in his oeuvre. The growing post-

colonial critique of Kureishi's work shows that his aesthetics and agenda as an author are mostly inconsistent with what is considered post-colonial; the main tenor of post-colonial criticism directed against Kureishi's work is that his writing lacks political commitment and unequivocal political statements. According to some critics, Kureishi merely hints at political positions and conflicts in *The Buddha*, but otherwise fails to suggest resolutions to political questions. For Susheila Nasta, Kureishi has managed to address the politics of marginalization in the novel, as his main protagonist Karim is confronted with post-imperial asymmetries of power that prescribe his place and status in society. However, Nasta finds fault with the novel's shortage of clear political statements and resolutions, doubting that Karim has grown more mature and aware of political issues or the place in society that has been assigned to him by others (203). According to Ranasinha, Kureishi's "refusal to commit" to neither the empowerment of the marginalised nor the powerful mainstream leaves recipients of his work with the difficulty of deciphering his and his protagonist's political position (236). This becomes particularly visible in Karim's deficiency to dedicate himself to the anti-racist cause. Unlike his friend Jamila, an anti-racist activist, Karim rather commits to pleasure and self-fulfilment, a world-view that Ranasinha calls "liberal individualism" (246). As his main protagonist Karim, Morrison suggests that the author Kureishi orientates himself towards the "liberal mainstream in British culture" (190), where he can be creative with little consideration of racial politics:

> In the struggle against race-thinking, certainly, the strategies of Kureishi's writing cannot be totalised in terms of the old opposition of separatism versus integration. More usefully, perhaps, his work can be thought of as a play for the imaginative centre ground. (Morrison 190)

Kureishi's playfulness with racial issues faces disapproval among critics who call upon serious treatment of racism as a despicable and inhuman act; he is criticised for his endeavours to ironize race and marginalize it as a social determinant among other categories such as class, gender, education or sexual orientation. For Ranasinha, Kureishi's aesthetic attempt to surpass the category and importance of race constitutes only "a small step from affiliation to the white dominant culture" (250). Morrison states that, while *The Buddha of Suburbia* "skate[s] on the edge of political orthodoxy", Kureishi also runs the risk of trivialising racist attacks as targets of his comedic efforts for the sake of his playfulness (184).

Kureishi's detachment from post-colonial concerns is visible, again, in the way

politics and political involvement are portrayed in the novel. *The Buddha* is narrated through the eyes of a first-person narrator who joins and quits political positions out of convenience. Karim Amir lacks political integrity to be considered a 'post-colonial hero' or an advocate for the interests of the marginalised. Instead, the protagonist-narrator is prone to pragmatic self-centeredness and a 'watch-and-wait' line. For Roy Sommer, Karim handles his position between assimilation and ethnic rootedness with a pragmatic observer's attitude that does not aim at easy, radical or idealist solutions (122). Karim's progression towards pragmatism and a cynical outlook on life plays a vital role in my argument. Pragmatism in the face of post-colonial antagonisms and Karim's observant stance in-between the centre of power and its powerless margins are inconsistent with the clear-cut politicised post-colonial discourse that tends to polarize the positions of Western centre of power, the marginalised Other, and the hybrid individual shipwrecked in between. Instead, critics like Kaleta highlight Karim's growing self-interest and cynicism: "As the book ends, Karim has become a character who figuratively fucks everybody. Now he is a man ready for the hypocrisies of society. The fragmented times have hardened Kureishi's Karim Amir from an aimless opportunist into an ageless cynic" (Kaleta 79). Karim's pursuit of pleasure and fame at any cost are equally inconsistent with the post-colonial criteria of 'oppositionality' and 'referentiality' (Ball 2009), thus disqualifying Karim as a credible post-colonial rebel.

What post-colonial standpoints mostly focus upon is Karim's narrative voice and the carelessness and mockery with which the young protagonist observes racial and cultural issues in his environment. Yet, the flamboyant tone of Karim's utterances is generated on the textual level, via incongruous elements that create comic effects. In my view, this critical focus on the first-person narrator monopolizes Karim and his sense of humour as a device for post-colonial opposition. What is left out of the equation is whether the comic effects on the textual level also support this thesis. What my analysis of the textual structure and its comic impulses will show is that the text comically disrupts the assumption that Karim embodies post-colonial activism. Post-colonial 'oppositionality' – the awareness of and activism against racial injustice – is certainly thematised in *The Buddha of Suburbia*; textual evidence, however, makes it difficult to attest Karim this kind of political uprightness. In the *Buddha of Suburbia*, political 'oppositionality' itself comes under attack. The novel refuses to offer easy political solutions but ironically explores and unmasks several

examples of political commitment as temporary and shallow exhibitionisms. Karim is not the only 'traitor' of post-colonial ideals and political activism. His father Haroon and even the widely hailed anti-racist feminist Jamila are depicted as characters whose political statements are comically countered on the textual level. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, it is therefore fallacious to expect transparent political commitment and post-colonial awareness when comic effects permeate and disarray samples of counter-racism. Instead, the novel accentuates personal interests that propel *and* betray political activism thus pointing to a world brimming with pragmatism, self-hood and political hypocrisy.

Time and again, critics have recurred to a handful of passages in *The Buddha of Suburbia* in order to substantiate the assumption that Karim is a narrator who, with the help of his comic rhetoric, expresses post-colonial opposition against racism, paternalism, and neo-colonial inscriptions. Certainly the 'Hairy Back incident' represents one of Karim's crucial encounters with racial abuse. As Karim comes to visit his white girlfriend Helen, her father, a hairy and bearded brute, takes his dog off the leash and does not let Karim come near the house because "[w]e're with Enoch. If you put one of your black 'ands near my daughter I'll smash it with a 'ammer! With a 'ammer!" (*The Buddha* 40) As Karim tries to take revenge on Hairy Back, slash the man's tyres and urinate in his car, he is approached by the dog of the family, the Great Dane. Turning his back on the animal, Karim discovers that "[t]he dog was in love with me – quick movements against my arse told me so. Its ears were hot" (*The Buddha* 41).

Critics have continually focused on two major aspects in this scene: Karim's dispute with Hairy Back and his encounter with the Great Dane. Both the dog and its master are considered epitomes of racial hatred and animalist brutality: for Ross, the animal-like brutality of Hairy Back is mirrored in his dog's attack on Karim. The parallels between the dog's physical assault and the verbal abuse of its racist owner lay open the primitiveness of racism and expose the farcical nature of Powellism (237). Similarly, Holmes argues that "[b]oth scenes depict Karim's humiliation as a victim of racism and also his instinct to resist and avenge this mistreatment" (648). Holmes concludes that, through narrative derision, Karim gives payback to Hairy Back's racist aggression and, by exposing his brute rottenness, crushes the "facade of middle-class respectability" (649). Allison and Curry claim that Karim's mockery is an expression of his rage at the fact that he is being 'abused' both by Hairy Back and

his dog; that is why Karim "transfers his potentially explosive rage from the father to the dog, from rage against political stances to anger against the libidinous actions of the dog" (162).

The tenor of the criticisms above is that Karim's encounter with the Great Dane is a prolongation of the openly racist encounter with the dog's master; the dog's 'rape attack' emulates Hairy Back's brutality and turns Karim into a victim of racial assault. But, does the text truly support this hypothesis? Do the comic effects that permeate this passage point to a rape, and more importantly, does Karim respond in a way that does justice to post-colonial 'oppositionality'? In order to capture the spectrum of humour in this episode and disclose its inteplay with racism, it is important to refrain from post-colonial assumptions and to concentrate on the text itself. The comic impulses within problematize race and anti-racism in a way that allows *The Buddha of Suburbia* to enter a new territory very much unlike post-colonial grounds.

Certainly, Karim's derision of Hairy Back is unequivocal in its aggressiveness; the narrator's description of his opponent is full of sarcastic references to his animal-like features:

> He was a big man with a black beard and thick arms. I imagined that he had hairy shoulders and, worst of all, a hairy back, like Peter Sellers and Sean Connery. . . . . And then I went white, but obviously not white enough, because Hairy Back let go of the dog he was holding, a Great fucking Dane . . . . .'You can't see my daughter again,' said Hairy Back. 'She doesn't go out with boys. Or with wogs. . . . . We don't want you blackies coming to the house. . . . . We don't like it,' Hairy Back said. 'However many niggers there are, we don't like it. We're with Enoch. If you put one of your black 'ands near my daughter I'll smash it with a 'ammer! With a 'ammer!' (*The Buddha* 39 f)

The exaggeration of Hairy Back's features pinpoints his excessive hair-growth, simple talk and mindless replication of racist slogans. Even his nickname encapsulates his brutish physicality. Hairy Back's speech is filled with repetitions such as 'we don't like it' or paroles like 'we're with Enoch', which disclose his uncontested allegiance with the right-wing National Front. The hairy brute appears a mere caricature, which is a technique of representation that, according to Freud, isolates and exaggerates distinctive (and negative) features in a person. For Freud, the caricaturing of individuals also serves to degrade the targets of such portrayal (212). The degradation of Hairy Back on the textual level aims at the reader's amusement: as we learn from humour theory, both Bergson (5) and Freud (147) point

to the invisible bond of mockery and shared laughter established between those who attack a common target of their scorn. Similarly, the comic impulses in the text guide the reader towards shared ridicule of the hairy brute (Morrison 183). Up to this point in my diagnosis, I yield a point to critics such as Holmes or Morrison who read Karim's mockery of Hairy Back as an outright dismissal of racist aggression (Ross 237; Holmes 649; Morrison 183). The disparaging effects in the text no doubt dissect Hairy Back as racist, ridiculous and imbecile.

What follows is an incident that many critics consider a continuation of Karim's humiliation as being 'not white enough': a closer look at the textual hints, however, uncloses a situation between Karim and the Great Dane permeated with comic impulses that suggest a bizarrely erotic encounter – and not a 'rape'. As Hairy Back abandons the scene, Karim is left alone with the Great Dane:

> I stood there pretending to be a stone or a tree until, gingerly, I turned my back on the dog and took a couple of steps, as if I were tip-toeing across a dangerous roof. I was hoping Helen [Karim's girlfriend] would open the window and call my name, and call the dog's name too. 'Oh, Helen, Helen,' I murmured. My soft words obviously affected the dog, for suddenly there was a flurry and I felt something odd on my shoulders. Yes, it was the dog's paws. The dog's breath warmed my neck. I took another step and so did the dog. I knew by now what the dog was up to. The dog was in love with me – quick movements against my arse told me so. Its ears were hot. I didn't think the dog would bite me, as its movements were increasing, so I decided to run for it. The dog shuddered against me. (*The Buddha* 40 f)

Upon closer examination, the impulses in Karim's recount point to peculiar eroticism. Words such as 'murmured', 'soft', 'affected', 'warmed' and 'shuddered' add up to an image of a dog strangely 'in love' with Karim. Karim even senses that there is no attack intended as the dog refrains from biting him. Instead, narratorial hints suggest a bizarre affection explained by the fact that the dog's 'ears were hot', a phrase reminiscent of an advice Karim has received from his father Haroon about women's sexual desires: "You can always tell when a woman is ready for sex. Oh yes. Her ears get hot" (*The Buddha* 32). The comparison of sexually aroused women and dogs whose desire is explained by temperature rise in atypical body parts (namely the ears) invokes parallels that are also peculiarly comic. The visual image of this scenery potentiates the impression of situational comedy that strongly resembles a funny home video: Karim is mounted by a love-crazed dog that is mistaking him for a suitable mate. The comic effect is aggravated by the surprise and inversion of the incident. What is unusual and unexpected is a dog's love interest in a

human being upon which the Great Dane takes action and unexpectedly mounts the object of his fancy. This passage lacks aggressiveness on the part of the dog; the textual hints point to genuine, albeit animal affection that is a far cry from Ross' assumption that the Great Dane 'rapes' Karim in the same manner that Hairy Back has abused him verbally (237). Comparing the textual impulses around Hairy Back and his own dog, it becomes obvious that the Great Dane's behaviour in fact contradicts his owner's brutality: while Hairy Back wants to 'smash Karim with a 'ammer', the dog 'was in love' with him.

Post-colonial readings of this scene[46] tackle power asymmetries between Karim and the dog and his master with a particular focus on Karim's evasion from rage, humiliation and possible victimization. At the same time, these readings neglect the entire spectrum of this situation's comic potential. The basic disposition of their interpretations is to detect power disparities caused by racist and sexual abuse and then, in a second step, assign meaning to the comic effects in the text that complies these power disparities. In my analysis, I take the opposite approach by examining the comic in the text first and then cross-checking its compatibility with post-colonial agendas. Naturally, if the primary focus on this scene is to identify forms of racist or sexual maltreatment, this focus excludes the capability of this situation to entertain and raise laughter in the reader. In other words, in order to have access to a text's comic potential, the reader (and the critic) has to possess "a structural and emotional structure that allows him/her to understand and enjoy humour" (Ermida 36). This positive predisposition, namely the expectation and the readiness to laugh and to look for textual constellations that generate comic effects is what Ermida refers to as "situational context" (Ermida 37). The situational context of the post-colonial approach is detection of narrative signs of post-colonial 'oppositionality' against racism and marginalization in literary writing. Consequently, the use of comic effects can only serve one purpose: the subversion and dismissal of racist tendencies. At the same time, this post-colonial situational context blocks out textual hints that are comic and in fact repudiate post-colonial parameters and ideas.

The comic potential of the 'Great Dane incident' reverberates even beyond this scene: leaving Hairy Back and his dog behind, Karim visits his uncle Ted and aunt Jean. In the scene that follows, the dog's ejaculate on Karim's jacket is turned into a

[46] Ross (2006); Holmes (2003); Allison and Curry (1996); Thomas (2005).

running gag and the final punchline of the chapter pointed at by Karim's aunt Jean: "[W]hat's that mess on the back of your coat?" (*The Buddha* 45) Jean's innocence is paired with the reader's insider knowledge that only minutes earlier, Karim has been mounted – not raped – by an affectionate dog. The final punchline of the chapter – Jean's bewilderment at the stain on Karim's jacket – breaks with a serious reading of the episode with the Great Dane. As Attardo reminds us, punchlines in a narrative serve as disruptions that force the reader to return to the outset of a passage and produce new interpretations that are compatible with the comic potential of the punchline (83). In this case, the punchline lends further comic tension to the episode with the Great Dane, demonstrating that, in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, comedy and derision are directed even against those who have rightly ridiculed their offenders. The comic effects pervading the portrayal of Hairy Back and Karim's experience with the Great Dane are not (exclusively) a sign of post-colonial 'oppositionality' but what Peter Berger refers to as 'orgiastic comic experience of the Bachtinian carnivalesque', a disparagement that "brings together what convention and morality want to see separated" and "ridicules any pretensions of seriousness – even that of the sacred" (P. Berger 20, my translation). Bachtin's multi-directional and 'orgiastic' derision is also at work in situations in *The Buddha of Suburbia* that at first glance strike as parade examples of post-colonial rebellion. Only, the alleged hero of the post-colonial rebellion, Karim, is then drawn into situational drollery that leaves little room for post-colonial seriousness. The reader is presented with a dilemma; as the Great Dane episode also bears comic potential, it first evokes and then disrupts potential amusement within the reader, thus demonstrating how easy it is to chuckle first and think second. Racism paired with comic effects is provocative: as Doyle states, the humour in *The Buddha of Suburbia* forces the readers to break from their expectations (118). One certainty the reader may employ when approaching *The Buddha of Suburbia* is taking racism seriously and assuming that, on the textual level, it is sketched with strategies that do justice to this expectation. What the novel leaves unresolved for the reader is the question whether one's own recognition of the comic impulse is appropriate when the source of the humour is a racist attack intertwined with comic potential. Put more simply: in case a reader approaches a passage with post-colonial support for its anti-racist hero, how easy or uneasy is it to laugh at their cost? What has to be acknowledged in the end is the disruption of the initial post-colonial reading of a passage via comic intrusions.

Similarly, other characters in the novel can be regarded as 'post-colonial anti-heroes'; becoming victims of racial assaults, they come out on top of the situation – and then use it for their personal interests, as is the case with Karim's friend Changez. Having immigrated from India only recently, Changez is physically attacked by a gang who cut right-wing symbols into his stomach. However, it is also Changez himself who manages to drive the gang away:

> It was a typical South London winter evening – silent, dark, cold, foggy, damp – when this gang jumped out on Changez and called him a Paki, not realizing he was Indian. They planted their feet all over him and started to carve the initials of the National Front into his stomach with a razor blade. They fled because Changez let off the siren of his Muslim warrior's call, which could be heard in Buenos Aires. (*The Buddha* 224)

To begin with, infusing textual representations of racist attacks with humour is a "high-risk strategy" for an author (Morrison 184). Morrison identifies this racist attack as a farce as Changez rescues himself from a life-threatening situation with the help of a martial howl. The critic poses the ethical question whether it is suitable to approach the serious issue of racism through a farcical lens by suggesting that portrayals like this can be accused of "sugar-coating race hatred with humour" (Morrison 184). Without doubt, the passage contains several comic impulses. Yet, it is rather difficult to dismiss them as simply a textual 'suger-coat' that belittles the seriousness of the attack. On closer inspection, comic stimuli collide with the sombreness of the scene ('winter evening – silent, dark, cold, foggy, damp'). What is more, the text delivers an unequivocal image of the brutality of Changez' attackers, lacking entirely any comic distraction ('feet all over him', 'razor blade'). Unlike Morrison, I argue that this scene has enough serious momentum to lay bare racist violence as a grave and disquieting phenomenon. However, the incident is complicated by Changez' super-hero howl that puts to flight his racist tormentors. His outcry is both cartoonish as it is exaggerated as a 'siren of Muslim warrior's call' audible in Buenos Aires. Despite the racial brutality in this scene, the passage a farcical twist that turns Changez into the sympathetic hero of the situation and his attackers into scared-away cowards. As much as Changez comes under attack, he also comes on top of the situation, thus blurring the image of a victimised immigrant and illustrating that "Karim's comic narration prevents characters from becoming victims" (Thomas 85). The novel's comic re-evaluation of immigrant victimization complicates further the sympathy of the reader for what has happened to Changez:

> Naturally [Changez] was shocked; shit-scared and shaken up . . . . But he hadn't been slow to take advantage of the kindness shown him by everyone. Sophie was now bringing him his breakfast in bed, and he'd been let off various cooking and washing-up duties. The police, who were getting sick of Changez, had suggested that he'd laid down under the railway bridge and inflicted the wound on himself, to discredit them. (*The Buddha* 224 f)

Karim informs the reader that Changez has actually become a beneficiary of the razor blade attack as he 'hadn't been slow to take advantage'. Here the reader has to quickly switch from Changez under attack to Changez capitalising on other people's pity. Whatever sympathy is left for Changez, it is now put into perspective as he makes use of his 'victim status'. But almost in the same breath, Changez is then turned into the object of institutional racism as he has to face the disbelief of the police. Karim accounts with biting cynicism the suspicion of the police that Changez has hurt himself to bring them into disrepute. What is significant for the humorous mode of this passage is the alteration with which it manipulates the sympathy of the reader. As Doyle points out, the ambiguous character of the comic in the novel exposes the readers to radically unstable readings of the text that provoke them "to take a distance from their certainties" (Doyle 118). This passage illustrates this effect *par excellence*; as the reader is torn between Changez the victim and Changez the cheating beneficiary, the antagonism between victim and malefactor is destabilised. Passages interlaced with such ambiguous and unpredictable mockery make unequivocal political (and post-colonial) readings of the novel impossible. Ranasinha attributes this comic ambiguity of the novel to Kureishi's agenda of political indetermination:

> Kureishi maintains an ironic distance posing difficult questions and resolutely refuses to provide closure. He gestures towards a range of possibilities from which the reader or viewer can develop his or her opinion. His ambivalence and ironic distance also make his work more difficult to interpret politically. Kureishi's irony is itself a refusal to commit. The various genres he employs embody this validation of uncertainty, resistance to totalising narratives and concern with the relativity of perception in different ways. (Ranasinha 236)

Ranasinha makes a valid point in observing that through textual irony, Kureishi avoids clear-cut political statements. The narrative supports this thesis: post-colonial parameters such as detection of racism and promotion of anti-racism are comically disrupted. The comic tone of *The Buddha of Suburbia* renders exclusively post-colonial readings of passages impossible.

For many critics,[47] Karim evolves into a post-colonial activist during his acting debut in London's theatre scene and his performance of Mowgli in an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. As he wants to abandon the monotony of suburbia and his "old role as a useless boy" (*The Buddha* 158), Karim finally gets hold of a role in a theatre play directed by the narcissistic and tyrannical Shadwell. As it turns out, Karim has blundered into a play bursting with neo-colonial images and stereotypes and he has been given the role because, in Shadwell's words, "you are Mowgli. You're dark-skinned, you're small and wiry, and you'll be sweet but wholesome in the costume. Not too pornographic, I hope. Certain critics will go for you. Oh yes" (*The Buddha* 142 f). Covered in mud to darken his skin and wearing nothing but a loincloth, Karim even has to mimic an Indian accent. On the stage however, Karim plays with the role that was ascribed to him: he falls back on the South London accent, thus creating a comic disparity between local speech and the stereotypical interpretation of Mowgli he has to impersonate (*The Buddha* 158). Several critics have argued that the purpose of Karim's comic improvisation is a sign of political opposition. For Allison and Curry, Karim parodies his Mowgli in order to restore minimal agency and to express his disapproval with the Orientalist images he is expected to embody (162). Holmes argues that, as this new Mowgli, "Karim does everything in his power – short of actually refusing the [Mowgli] part – to make it less demeaning for him and for spectators of South Asian descent" (657); Holmes agrees with Allison and Curry that Karim comically affects his role as Mowgli in order to express his criticism of the stereotypical images he is coerced to perpetuate on stage (657).

What these critical voices overlook is the context in which Karim's performance is placed; it is not in the midst of Karim's frustration with his role but out of pleasure with it that the young actor slips into his Cockney accent:

> [T]he play did good business, especially with schools, and I started to relax on stage, and to enjoy acting. I sent up the accent and made the audience laugh by suddenly relapsing into cockney at odd times. 'Leave it out, Bagheera,' I'd say. I liked being recognized in the pub afterwards, and made myself conspicuous in case anyone wanted my autograph. (*The Buddha* 158)

It is crucial to embed and read Karim's parody of Mowgli in the context of its occurrence, Karim's career aspirations and his credibility as a post-colonial or

[47] Allison and Curry (1996); Carey (1997); Holmes (2002); Thomas (2005).

political activist. On stage, the main protagonist makes use of two criteria required for humorous potential: contrast and surprise (Ermida 25). As Mowgli, Karim plays with his audience's expectations as he switches from the stereotypical Indian accent to Cockney in the middle of his performance. His comic improvisation is placed in an environment of comfort essential for the appreciation of the humorous experience (Morreall, "Funny Ha-Ha" 196). At the moment when he starts to insert Cockney accent into his performance, Karim is 'relaxed' and 'enjoying' his presence on stage. The young actor thus focuses on his aim to 'make the audience laugh' and to be recognised by potential fans off-stage. In this situation where the comic is deliberately staged, post-colonial motives of 'oppositionality' take a backseat in favour of Karim's ambitions as an entertainer and actor. Shortly before his performance, Karim realizes how much his role as Mowgli has changed him throughout the play:

> [D]espite the yellow scarf strangling my balls, the brown make-up, and even the accent, I relished being the pivot of the production. . . . . I required a longer rest, and could I be driven home by someone, as I felt so tired? I had to have Assam tea (with a touch of lapsang souchong) available at all times during rehearsal. . . . . I began to see that I could ask for things I needed. I gained confidence. (*The Buddha* 149 f)

Karim puts on the airs and graces of a diva and is fully aware of his own impact on the play. His self-concept of a rising star actor collides with the arguments above claiming that Karim parodies his Mowgli in order to re-gain some agency (Allison and Curry 162) and limit the humiliation through which he is being put (Holmes 657). The text accentuates Karim's attitude towards power and his increasing self-centeredness ('longer rest', 'Assam tea'). The reader is informed that Karim aspires to the same eccentricity and mass appeal with which his friend Charlie and his father Haroon sell individuality as a good that can be consumed and admired by their fans and followers *(The Buddha* 149). Declaring himself 'the pivot of the production', Karim has arrived at the centre of the power and attention a young actor can receive as the main protagonist of a play. How do Karim's career goals blend with post-colonial resistance towards and abolition of power imbalance and agency for the deprived? The young actor's strive for success impedes any selfless opposition against the overpowering supremacy of the theatre business with its colonialist bias. Instead, Karim has tasted success and the power that it summons and as an actor, he now openly insists upon special treatment. Karim may 'hate inequality' *(The Buddha* 149), but his main concern consists in climbing the career ladder.

And yet, Karim's ruthless career ambitions are neither amateurish nor innocent. Karim is aware of his "bargain with the devil" (Buchanan 20) as he embarks on the machinery of the theatre merchandise, noticing with a scoffing slant that he 'makes himself conspicuous' for his fans (*The Buddha* 158). As the first-person narrator, Karim comments on and evaluates his own actions with a dose of ironic self-ridicule that points to the ability of an individual to confess their own follies (Horn 199). This self-mockery attests to Karim's awareness of his near-fraternization with the theatre enterprise as he has come to enjoy his success and the attention of the audience even in an Orientalist play like Shadwell's. However, as Karim both observes and derides his new self-awareness as a rising star, he makes it impossible for the reader to fully condemn his behaviour. Ranasinha argues that "[t]he self-deprecating Karim generates humour and sympathy, drawing us in to 'naturalise', if not endorse his selfishness" (246), thus confirming the conclusion made by Martin et al. that self-defeating mockery aims at the sympathy and acceptance of the audience one intends to amuse (52). As Karim comments on his fall from grace with a substantial portion of comic self-critique, it is difficult for the reader to bear a grudge against the young narrator. Instead of (self-)condemnation, the novel thus pleas for critical sympathy: Karim is in as far less foolish and absent-minded (Bergson 9) than other characters as he aware of his own inconsistencies, his involvement with Shadwell and the fact that he has begun to take pleasure in a highly neo-colonial theatre play.

Karim's career pragmatism has not been left unnoticed by some critics who claim that Karim is a character who often lacks political or moral integrity. Ranasinha for instance, draws on the novel's politically more outspoken characters such as Karim's friend and political activist Jamila in order to expose Karim as a character who lacks political integrity and anti-racist awareness. While Jamila remains politically engaged, Karim soon abandons any political position for what Ranasinha calls "liberal individualism that evades political commitment to the anti-racist movement" (246). Even Holmes, a critic who has previously proposed that Karim's vulgar and flamboyant language is a carnivalesque counter-strategy against all the social oppressions he has to endure (645), acknowledges that Karim's theatre performance as Mowgli has little political impact. Although Karim indeed parodies neo-colonial stereotypes on stage, he is a poor advocate of political ideas which he soon abandons in favour of his career advancement (Holmes 663). Buchanan states that Karim even utilizes political ideas out of self-interest and for the sake of his

personal agenda: "[I]n a world where no one's politics are authentic or consistent, Karim is free to adopt whatever position suits him; he admits that his own protests against society's injustices are self-serving and strategic" (48).

Naturally, Karim's willingness to perform in a play such as *The Jungle Book* is heavily criticised by Karim's father Haroon and by Jamila, Karim's friend and an anti-racist revolutionary. After seeing Karim's performance (in which he still mimics the exaggerated Indian accent) Haroon is outraged by *The Jungle Book* and his son's participation in it: "'Bloody half-cocked business,' he said. 'That bloody fucker Mr Kipling pretending to whity he knew something about India! And an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel!'" (*The Buddha* 157) Clearly, Haroon is indignant at the excessive exoticism of the play which invites the audience to eyeball Karim in his blackened camouflage. However, at an earlier point in the novel, the narrator informs the reader about Haroon's eagerness to sell shrill eccentricity at any cost. In a self-transformation for the sake of commercial success, Haroon exoticizes himself by dressing for his spiritual gatherings "in a crimson waistcoat with gold and silver patterns" in which he, as Karim suggests, looks like "a midget toreador" (*The Buddha* 29). Ironically enough, Haroon has deliberately adopted the very same accent that Karim has to imitate in Shadwell's play: "He [Haroon] was hissing his s's and exaggerating his Indian accent. He'd spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, and now he was putting it back in spadeloads" (*The Buddha* 21). Exploiting neo-colonial images himself, Haroon holds too little authority and integrity to be a genuine critic of his son's performance. The text exposes Haroon as an exotic, commercialised Buddha illustrative of the fact that no character can point his or her finger at another character without being debunked in their own political inconsistencies.

Hailed by post-colonial critics as the only character who stands by her anti-racist convictions, Jamila openly attacks the commercial distribution of colonial stereotypes in Shadwell's theatre practice and suspects Karim's compliance with it:

> 'You looked wonderful,' she said, as if she were speaking to a ten-year-old after a school play. '… But no doubt about it, the play is completely neo-fascist[,] . . . . [a]nd it was disgusting, the accent and the shit you had smeared over you. You were just pandering to prejudices . . . . [a]nd clichés about Indians. And the accent - my God, how could you do it? I expect you're ashamed, aren't you? . . . . Actually, you've got no morality, have you? You'll get it later, I expect, when you can afford it.' (*The Buddha* 157)

Jamila realizes that Karim has joined a play where he accepts to perform along the lines of its Orientalist aesthetics. It is above all her criticism of Karim's willingness to participate in *The Jungle Book* that turns Jamila into an agent of post-colonial disapproval. Oubechou endorses this point by arguing that Jamila "considers that, in the guise of exoticism, neo-colonialism is in fact the result of a collaboration between … 'the oppressor and the oppressed'" (103). Correspondingly, critics such as Nasta state that compared to Jamila, Karim fails to mature in political awareness and post-colonial apprehension (203). In a similar manner, Ranasinha suggests that Jamila is a character whose strong political beliefs and anti-racist agenda are considered genuine and more constant than Karim's engagement (Ranasinha 246).

Jamila may confront Karim with powerful political statements, yet portrayals of Jamila's activism brims with comic effects that call her engagement (and post-colonial 'oppositionality') into question. Jamila's role as an anti-racist activist and a minority individual out of conviction evokes the impression of a costumed and at times farcical militancy:

> Under the influence of Angela Davis, Jamila had started exercising every day, learning karate and judo, getting up early to stretch and run and do press-ups. She bowled along like a dream, Jamila; she could have run on snow and left no footsteps. She was preparing for the guerilla war she knew would be necessary when the whites finally turned on the blacks and Asians and tried to force us into gas chambers or push us into leaky boats. (*The Buddha* 56)

This passage suggests that Jamila's anti-racist combat appears a preparation for an exaggerated apocalypse in which whites will eradicate blacks and Asians by pushing them into 'gas chambers' or 'leaky boats'. Jamila has transformed herself into a splendid and skillful soldier for a battle that, as the reader learns from Karim's sarcastic exaggeration, will never come. Jamila's engagement gains farcical momentum when the narrator uncovers whom Jamila actually mimics in her fight. As Karim complains that being politically active requires early rising, Jamila replies: "Cuba wasn't won by getting up late, was it? Fidel and Che didn't get up at two in the afternoon, did they? They didn't even have time to shave!" (*The Buddha* 56) As if her activism is a role that requires outer transformation, Jamila's attitudes include appropriate costuming. The fact that in her National Health glasses, several sack-like skirts and a pair of Dr Martens she looks "like a Chinese peasant" makes Karim laugh (*The Buddha* 80 f). Karim also informs the reader about Jamila's motivations: Jamila is convinced that Mrs Cutmore, her former mentor, has colonised her by sharing subversive ideas with her and telling her that "she was brilliant" (*The*

Buddha 53). Karim's narrative comment entirely dismisses Jamila's conviction:

> She drove me mad by saying Miss Cutmore colonized her, but Jamila was the strongest-willed person I'd met: no one could turn her into a colony. . . . . Without Miss Cutmore, Jamila wouldn't have even heard the world 'colony'. 'Miss Cutmore started you off,' I told her. (*The Buddha* 53)

Jamila's motives are exposed as dubious. She is convinced that Mrs Cutmore's mentorship was an attempt to coloniZe her; Karim, however, concludes that it was with Mrs Cutmore that Jamila learned about political empowerment and subversive thinking in the first place. Jamila's activism against white racism soon channels into aversions against all white people as potential racist perpetrators. Yet, it is an irony that her drive for self-empowerment and emancipation has been implanted by a white mentor. Jamila's activism is performed and misguided; she fails to realize that she is as much influenced by Western thinking as she believes herself to be Indian. Critics such as Schoene also point to "grave inconsistencies" in Jamila's counter-active consciousness:

> [Jamila] finds she cannot retrieve an identity she never had. Defining herself as Indian, she rejects her Englishness as colonial imposition. She is then forced to realize that the only true violation of her selfhood is inflicted upon her by the native traditions of her own country. (Schoene, "Herald of Hybridity" 116 f)[48]

In other words, Jamila's political militancy is an attempt to defend an Indian identity unspoiled by and emancipated from Western thinking. In her activism, Jamila is absent-minded (Bergson 9); she falls back on idols of guerilla practice and feminist philosophy without realising that she is combating a part of herself, a part of her that is English and shaped by English education. Jamila performs anti-racist opposition that soon turns into anti-white hostility. Her attempts to crystallize an emancipated Asian identity within herself are insubstantial as they eradicate a part of her that is as much English as it is Indian. From the post-colonial perspective, Jamila is an outspoken epitome of anti-racist activism and political emancipation; however, what the comic effects accompanying her portrait reveal is that Jamila has 'taken up' militancy with much enthusiasm but with little apprehension. That her anti-racist campaign becomes irrelevant in the course of events becomes apparent when she abandons it for a lesbian relationship in a commune. Here I agree with Buchanan's conclusion that Jamila's anti-racist politics has lost its meaning by the end of the

[48] Here Schoene alludes to family pressure that forced Jamila to marry Changez.

novel (20). The significance of Jamila's post-colonial activism is fleeting at best; what the text guides the reader towards is the impression that it has rather represented a short and passionate identification with (and imitation of) subversive thinking and guerilla tactics.

Thanks to comic effects on the textual level, Jamila forfeits her image as a credible and steady post-colonial combatant. The difference between Karim and Jamila consists in self-awareness and awareness of one's own (lack of) activism. The narrative attests Karim a knowing and pragmatic attitude with which the main protagonist continually betrays anti-racist commitment for the sake of personal interests. Jamila, on the other hand, loses herself in her admiration of feminist writers and Cuban fighters to the extent that she becomes a caricature of subversiveness. All Jamila' undertakings are measured by the effect that will make her stand out in her subversiveness: "… Jamila was interested in anarchists and situationists and Weathermen, and cut all that stuff out of the papers and showed it to me. . . . . Everything in her life would be disrupted, experimented with" (*The Buddha* 82). To enforce her sexual liberation, Jamila sleeps with Karim in public toilets while 'wearing feathers, for God's sake' (*The Buddha* 52); she consents to arranged marriage as an act of "rebellion against rebellion" (*The Buddha* 82) and develops a passion for her lesbian relationship with Joanna (*The Buddha* 277). While critics celebrate Jamila as a character who dares to question neo-colonial theatre enterprise, sexual boundaries and marriage conventions, the Karim states that Jamila is "going too far" (*The Buddha* 157). Whenever Karim follows his own interests that violate Jamila's radical ideals, he is met by Jamila's exaggerated accusations "as if I were sitting with Eichmann" (*The Buddha* 80) and "as if I were some kind of criminal rapist" (*The Buddha* 232).

Finally, Karim counters Jamila's moralising dismissals with a deadpan remark that silences her fierceness and signifies Karim's refusal to acknowledge her judgement. After he decides to get involved in an anti-racist rally, Karim changes his mind, eager to catch his lover Eleanor in the act of cheating (see *The Buddha* 225 f). Once more, Jamila is enraged by Karim's inconsequence: "Where are you going as a person, Karim?" (*The Buddha* 232) Karim, however, has little interest in a dispute about his motives and responds rather bluntly: "Over there" (*The Buddha* 232). Karim's answer is comical in several ways: to begin with, it is a trivial answer to an existential question. In its literal sense, it belittles Jamila's indignation at Karim's

lack of political integrity as it signifies that Karim is moving across the theatre lobby where their conversation takes place. On a metaphorical level, 'over there' indicates Karim's inner refusal to comply with any political or ideological stance. In this case, 'over there' implies 'away from the anti-racist' to which Jamila has dedicated herself.

As the main protagonist's motto is 'over there' instead of 'fighting back', it is safe to argue that Karim is the 'post-colonial anti-hero' of this novel, a main protagonist too inconsistent and pragmatic to pursue political awareness, thus unfit for the role of an authority of political commitment and moral integrity. Jamila, his activist-friend and upholder of oppositional thinking, also comes under fire of comic effects on the textual level. A personified echo of post-colonial agendas, Jamila in fact takes up an anti-racist stance the exact way she rebels against her marriage or enforces sexual liberation. The text pinpoints and highlights a "typical Jamila" who commits to a cause "out of perversity" (*The Buddha* 82) or pursues subversiveness for the sake of subversiveness. Unlike post-colonial critics, I come to the conclusion that thanks to the comic effects in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Jamila appears a distorted and caricatured representative of 'post-colonial oppositionality' whose political fierceness often morphs into guerilla hysteria "inspired by the possibility that a white group might kill one of us one day" (*The Buddha* 56).

As with the political integrity of the novel's characters, the reader is furthermore kept in suspense about the unambiguity of the novel's anti-racist agenda. As comic effects permeate passages that depict racial assault, they create a peculiar tension between the post-colonial reading and the comic potential of an extract. Racist attacks in the narrative are countered with comic interludes that complicate the relation between perpetrator and victim and impede the novel's promotion of post-colonial 'oppositionality'. In short, the comic disrupts the post-colonial.

2.2. Contesting Agency and the 'Burden of Representation' in *The Buddha of Suburbia*

You have to show Asian people being particularly nice. As though anybody in literature was nice. As though Anna Karenina was a nice woman.

- Hanif Kureishi[49]

[49] qtd. in an unpublished interview with Susan Fischer at Roehampton University, February 2012, my emphasis.

Hanif Kureishi's parentage has from the very beginning been one of the cardinal aspects in the critical response to his writing. Born to a white English mother and a Pakistani father, Kureishi has found himself confronted with aesthetic expectations imposed upon his work both by minority critics and the dominant British mainstream culture. These expectations can be summarised under the 'burden of representation', a term coined by Mercer (1994), according to whom artists on the margins of the cultural mainstream are expected to operate as ambassadors of their minority communities (235). As a consequence, artists with a non-white ethnic background are obliged to produce favourable and representative aesthetic representations of their ethnicity. Apart from the fact that this evokes the false impression that diaspora communities (such as Islamic or black communities) are politically united entities represented by prominent artist celebrities (Mercer 251), partial and all too favourable representations of ethnicity prevent critical discourses of the communal and the ethnic. Mercer criticizes this "unspoken internal imperative that, as black [or in this case, immigrant Asian] subjects, we should never discuss our 'differences' in public: that we should always defer and delay our criticism by doing our 'dirty laundry' in private" (238). Ranasinha broadens Mercer's notion of the 'burden of expectation' by adding aesthetic and political criteria expected by the predominantly white cultural mainstream: British-born minority writers "are often constructed by the dominant culture as privileged insiders and translators of minority *communities* who live in Britain" (Ranasinha 6, emphasis in the original). In other words, minority authors are subjected to both minority interests and the presuppositions of the mainstream public. Whereas the cultural mainstream expects ethnic authenticity, minority interests consist in favourable artistic representations of the marginal experience. Consequently, the 'burden of representation' as it is understood in my analysis of *The Buddha of Suburbia* encompasses several aspects: the expectation of positive artistic and literary images of immigrants in Britain; the status of the minority artist as an authentic representative of his/her ethnic community; and finally the ability of the artist to act both as a herald of ethnicity and translator between cultures.

In my analysis of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Mercer's 'burden of representation' is understood as a distorted form of post-colonial agency, or, in John Ball's words, post-colonial 'referentiality'. In the British context, it consists of adequate and authentic portrayals of British-Asian marginality. Along this line of argument,

Kureishi's persona and work have been perceived as expressions of artistic agency for the Asian community in Britain. While Kureishi has been given the status of a lone cultural advocate, his portrayals of ethnicity have been considered authentic by the white British mainstream (Ranasinha 237). According to Ranasinha, this artistic 'burden of representation' however, "is precisely the trap that Kureishi wants to break from by articulating a range of diverse, conflicting perspectives of the community" (235). Kureishi's authorial break-away from positive images of the marginal and the communal finds its expression in Asian characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* who are a far from being idealised. That is also the reason why minority critics such as Mahmood Jamal are less enthusiastic about Kureishi's work, criticising his exploitation and perpetuation of stereotypical portrayals of Asian people and portraying them as money-crazed, promiscuous schemers (qtd. in Ranasinha 235; see also Procter, "New Ethnicities" 102).

Kureishi's refusal to put his artistic work to the service of black and minority experience in Britain is reflected in the aesthetics of his writing. According to Moore-Gilbert, *The Buddha of Suburbia* dismisses essentialist identities summoned both within the dominant and the minority culture, thus resisting communal self-satisfaction ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" 200). Jones follows suit by stating the the novel subverts the conventional image of the immigrant as a suppressed and marginalised subject who heroically endures his condition (Jones 98). What is more, Kureishi repeals clear-cut boundaries between cultures and ascriptions of 'good' and 'evil' races. As Kaleta points out, Kureishi dismisses positively biased representations and cultural exclusion in his writing, as it turns "storytelling [into] the literature of a subculture" (6). Instead, Kureishi carves out the individuality of all his characters, a disposition that leads to their "remarkable and repulsive, hopeful and devastating" (Kaleta 6) personalities. In a similar manner, Maxey suggests that Kureishi's characters are 'three-dimensional' (8).

My focus on the comic and the politics of representation of ethnicity dovetails with several of the foregoing statements. In reminiscence of Iser's proposition that novels always oppose an an 'old' idea by replacing it with 'new' perspectives (Iser 1972), I argue that, via comic effects, *The Buddha of Suburbia* overturns all too favourable portrayals of ethnicity and marginality. Whether black, marginal or Asian, communal experience is put into perspective. According to Procter, in case Kureishi thematizes British Asian experience in his fiction, it is "perhaps more productively

read as critique … of the way ethnicity is conventionally represented than as [a] faithful attempt … to capture 'the Asian experience'" ("New Ethnicities" 110). *The Buddha of Suburbia* refrains from favourable representations and political aesthetics that strengthen the solidity of and solidarity with black or immigrant experience and promote the empowerment of the marginalised. Instead, comic impulses help to disclose ethnic characters as 'three-dimensional' human beings similarly troubled and conflicted as their white counterparts. In its thematization of the ethnic and the marginal, *The Buddha of Suburbia* abandons post-colonial agendas of empowerment and agency and takes a humanist approach instead. As white characters, black and Asian characters are debunked in their imperfections and vulnerabilities, proving that being not 'particularly nice' is a human universal that constitutes the spectrum of human experience.

One of the key strategies of the novel to dismantle the 'burden of expectation' is to let speak characters who echo its demands of authenticity and partiality and to comically unveil the absurdity of their demands. As an actor with Asian origin, Karim is asked to deliver authentic portraits of the Asian community. Karim's first attempt to impersonate an Asian character is inspired by an incident from his immediate circle of friends and family: his Uncle Anwar undertakes a hunger-strike in order to force his daughter Jamila into an arranged marriage with Changez, a boy from India. Having presented 'his' Anwar in front of his acting group, Karim is heavily attacked by Tracey, a black actress who, as the text informs the reader, "dressed like a secretary; but she was also bothered by things: she worried about what it meant to be a black woman" (*The Buddha* 179). Tracey accuses Karim of portraying members of the Black and Asian communities as irrational and hysterical fanatics blinded by religious zeal. For her, Anwar's hunger-strike and Jamila's arranged marriage perpetuate typical British-Asian stereotypes of "the authoritarian patriarch, the unhappy arranged marriage, and the Asian woman as submissive victim of the family itself" (Yousaf 41). Tracey heavily rejects these images as she rejects any self-criticism of ethnic communities: "We have to protect our culture at this time, Karim. . . . . It's white truth you're defending here. It's white truth we're discussing" (*The Buddha* 181). Tracey's tirade culminates in the conclusion that Karim despises both himself and the community that he comes from (*The Buddha* 180):

> Your picture is what white people already think of us. That we're funny, with strange habits and weird customs. To the white man we're already people without humanity, and then you go and have Anwar madly waving his stick at

> the white boys. . . . . You show us as unorganized aggressors. Why do you hate yourself and all black people so much, Karim? (*The Buddha* 180)

While Tracey attacks Karim for the alleged 'white truth' of his portrayal, the comic 'truth' in this situation is that Karim has simply reproduced Uncle Anwar's behaviour, who in his outrage has attacked white gangs while they were trying to demolish his store (*The Buddha* 171). Despite the authenticity of his impersonation of Anwar, Karim is "asked to represent what he is expected to be …, a member of an oppressed minority, which corresponds to the (oppressed/oppressor) binary pattern of guilt which [Tracey] … and such likes can understand" (Oubechou 105). The rest of the crew sides with Tracey, yet not because her argument is accurate but because, as Karim observes, "[i]t was difficult to disagree with someone whose mother you'd found kneeling in front of a middle-class house with a bucket and mop" (*The Buddha* 180 f). Ironically enough, in her activism to protect the interests of the black and Asian community, Tracey's position as a marginal individual is cemented even more; instead of challenging the (im)plausibility of her argument, her co-actors comply, embarrassed by the fact that Tracey speaks from a place of social marginalization that entitles her to speak 'the truth' – its plausibility or absurdity notwithstanding.

Critics agree upon Tracey as a symbolic figure of cultural self-affirmation at the cost of censorship and separatist thinking. Tracey's hasty generalizations about a common black brotherhood lack rationality: for Schoene, Tracey "has internalized the *whitegeist* of multiculturalist discourse, lumbering her with a straitjacking cultural heritage whose authenticity she is neither encouraged to question, nor free to slough off. Blackness is simply defined as non-whiteness" ("Herald of Hybridity" 123, emphasis in the original). Moore-Gilbert points out that Tracey's essentialist idea of Blackness supported by internal self-stereotyping enforces out-group hostility and is reminiscent of colonial stereotyping of the colonised culture ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" 204). The text gives evidence of Tracey's distinction between 'black' and 'white': dehumanised by 'white truth', black communities and culture require protection. Tracey's cultural self-enforcement aims at empowering black experience. At the same time, it still parallels Orientalist notions of a clear-cut front between the white Western culture and the marginalised Other. Tracey's separation of 'black' and 'white' is enforced by negative inscriptions of opposite mindsets and behaviour (Said 49). As white people 'dehumanize' black

minorities, black people need to unite against stereotypes of being 'irrational, ridiculous, hysterical, and fanatical' (*The Buddha* 180). Resisting Tracey's cultural protectionism, Karim's comments dismantle her zeal to fragment the world in black and white fronts and black and white truths: for Tracey, Anwar pursues a 'fanatical hunger-strike' while Karim suggests it is a "calmly intended blackmail" (*The Buddha* 180); while in Tracey's view, Karim's impersonation of Anwar taints the image of "black people", for Karim, it is merely a portrait of "[o]ne old Indian man" (*The Buddha* 180). Karim's rather sobering comments comically juxtapose and exacerbate Tracey's hysteria; however, they also highlights the danger of a unified political front against the white culture and the cultural and political self-glorification it implies.

Tracey is not the only mouthpiece of the 'burden of expectation' in the novel: Karim is requested to add an ethnic twist to Pyke's theatre group based upon the presumption that the colour of Karim's skin makes him an ambassador of a shared and exciting black experience. Again, the narrator-protagonist is taken by surprise: "'We need someone from your own background,' [Pyke] said. 'Someone black.' . . . . I didn't know anyone black, though I'd been at school with a Nigerian. But I wouldn't know where to find him" (*The Buddha* 170). It is difficult to determine whether Karim's response is a sign of innocence or sarcasm against Pyke's request. While Pyke's perception of Blackness resembles Tracey's assumption that the status of Blackness implies a shared cultural identity and a political consolidation of minorities, Karim differentiates between a plurality of black identities, thus dismissing all-encompassing notions of Blackness and ethnicity. Karim's remark about not knowing anyone black except for a Nigerian schoolmate "satirizes race rather than taking it seriously [and] registers a more general refusal in Kureishi's work to delegate or speak for a 'right-on' black British experience" ("New Ethnicities" 110). The comic deflation with which the novel portrays Pyke's and Tracey's expectations signifies resistance against conventional images of essentialised identities, be that for the purpose of in-group solidarity against the white dominant culture or demands for black exoticism.

Comic dissection of characters that promote the 'burden of representation' represents one of several strategies of critique of this concept in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Textual exploitation of ethnic stereotypes and Karim's narrative ridicule of Asian immigrant characters appears to be another technique: "[T]he novel … pulls one ethnic register after the other, and thereby self-consciously inscribes itself into

the genre [of 'ethnic' writing]. . . . .What is the meaning of the excessive and stereotypical references to ethnicity?" (Stein 118) Particularly in the portrayal of Karim's uncle Anwar as a religious zealot and tyrannical paterfamilias, the narrative without restraint operates with stereotypical attributes of the 'authoritarian patriarch' and Islamic traditionalist (Yousaf 41). Ranasinha points to the precarious nature of this representation by claiming that Islam and fundamentalism seems to be equalised in Kureishi's work: "Kureishi sets up an irresolvable opposition between community and individual: there is no representation of the communal that is not fundamentalist" (Ranasinha 244).

Karim's uncle Anwar is a paramount example for an Asian character whose beliefs and behaviour ooze stereotype humour. Plotting an arranged marriage for his daughter Jamila, Anwar's traditionalist (and simplistic) principles about immigrant life are put in a nutshell as follows:

> According to Anwar, Jamila would become pregnant immediately, and soon there'd be little Anwars running all over the place. Anwar would attend the kids' cultural upbringing and take them to school and mosque while Changez was, presumably, redecorating the shop, moving boxes and impregnating my girlfriend Jamila again. (*The Buddha* 80)

At the core of Anwar's ambitions is an accumulation of clichéd and repetitive immigrant mantras (renewal of the family tree, cultural and religious upbringing, family-run business). Anwar's aspirations for his daughter's future are in as far comic as they seem a mere replica of his own immigrant experience. Anwar's eagerness to re-install what he considers an appropriate Asian marriage and upbringing in his daughter's life bears comic potential that can be traced back to Bergson's notion of comic inelasticity in human beings (Bergson 6). According to Bergson, the more an individual counterfeits machine-like behaviour, and the more he/she resembles "a mere puppet" that fails to adapt to the dynamics of life, the more risible he/she appears (14).[50] Rigid Asian identities are doomed to fail in *The Buddha of Suburbia.* The gravity and rigidness with which Anwar implements Asian cultural traditions cuts against the grain of a new understanding of identity in *The Buddha of Suburbia* that is dynamic and constantly negotiated (Ilona 101). The novel therefore actively exploits the cliché of a traditionalist paterfamilias who bandages his family and the continuity of his family name with the economic efficiency of his greengrocery.

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[50] Similarly, Ross points to the comic potential of cultural and identity rigidity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*: "[T]he more *in*flexible a character's conception of identity, the more vulnerable will that character be to Kureishi's corrosive laughter" (236, emphasis in the original).

Karim's above observations of Anwar's immigrant aspirations are saturated with ridicule and sarcastic disapproval, hence mirroring the novel's critical disposition towards traditionalism, rigid immigrant identity and the restraints of the communal. Moreover, the narrator derives Anwar's narrow-mindedness as an immigrant father and patriarch from his religious credo as a Muslim: "Like many Muslim men – beginning with the Prophet Mohammed himself, whose absolute statements, served up piping hot from God, inevitably gave rise to absolutism – Anwar thought he was right about everything" (*The Buddha* 172). Passages as these are read as negative generalizations of Islam in Kureishi's writing, as, in Ranasinha's words, "Kureishi never explores any forms of Islam that are not 'fundamentalist'" (244). For Ranasinha, Kureishi overtly mocks religious worldviews as negative and simple-minded while preferring a secular rationale (244). Karim makes a sarcastic comment on the religious authority and zeal with which Muslim immigrants such as Anwar make sense of their world. The narrator's snort at the rules 'served up piping hot from God' is a sarcastic dismissal of Islam as a unifying, unerring force that grants its followers a sense of divine legitimization in whatever they do. What the novel targets is the consolidating power of the religious dogma of Islam mostly practised in traditional Muslim Asian communities. In the same spirit, Kureishi comments on fundamentalism as phenomenon that coheres immigrant communities from the inside but that also neglects cultural and social dynamics:

> [F]undamentalism is interesting. Because, to me, it's an attempt to create purity. It's to say we're not really living in England at all. We're going to keep everything that's English, everything that's capitalist, everything that's white, everything that's corrupt, it's going to be outside. And everything that's good and pure and Islamic, you know, it's going to be in here, with these people. And you can see that mixing, you know, was terrifying, just as racists find mixing terrifying. But of course it's [the mixing] inevitable. (Kureishi in MacCabe 50)

According to Kureishi's statement, fundamentalism in minority communities is an attempt to create essentialist cultural enclaves against the undeniable current of exchange and alteration. The comic portrayal of Anwar's Islam in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is then understood as a sarcastic critique of the 'good and pure and Islamic' self-affirmation and self-legitimization against the cultural and economic corruption of the outer (white, English, mainstream) world. I therefore argue that *The Buddha of Suburbia* tackles that sort of internal critique that the 'burden of representation' makes impossible, namely the negative consequences of the religious, traditional and

the communal immigrant dynamics. In other words, with the help of comic effects, the novel lays open the 'dirty laundry' (Mercer 238) of the ethnic and the communal that would have otherwise remained uncovered. Consequently, the comic portrayal of Anwar illustrates the novel's attempt "to satirize a despotic old migrant's senseless clinging to outworn custom amid a new and contrary environment" (Ross 244).

Whenever he speaks of Anwar in front of white people, Karim is confronted with accusations of betrayal and nest-fouling. When asking Jamila for permission to tell his girlfriend Helen about Anwar's latest caprice, Karim receives the following answer: "'Yes, if you want to expose our culture as being ridiculous and our people as old-fashioned, extreme and narrow-minded.' So I told Helen about the hunger-strike. Jamila butted in to add details and keep us up to date" (*The Buddha* 71). The comic potential of this passage is generated by the moral impetus of Jamila's initial statement to protect and promote a positive image of immigrants – followed by a double breach of rule. Karim asks Jamila for permission only to disobey seconds later; his disobedience reflects his disregard of self-censorship through expectations of others. The comic impetus even increases as Jamila unexpectedly joins Karim in his mockery of Anwar only seconds after having expressed her disapproval. Even she, a fierce campaigner against white racism and the oppression of immigrants, surrenders to gossip and the curiosity fuelled by the fact that Anwar has seized for extortion through fasting in order to force her into traditional marriage. Both characters betray notions of (political) correctness and solidarity with non-white ethnicity; their initial reservations against gossip and unflattering portrayals are only brief and cannot be taken seriously. As neither Jamila nor Karim are ready to bow to politically correct discreetness or to palliate Anwar's caprice, they reflect the novel's refusal to give in to euphemistic portrayals of minority characters.

Apart from opposing ideas of ethnic advocacy and the political appropriateness of artistic aesthetics, the novel also aims at new representations of non-white diasporas in Britain. This new type of representation is visible in *The Buddha*'s portrait of Anwar who is far more than a "facile caricature" (Yousaf 42). Apprehending Anwar as a backward prototype of immigrant experience would indeed be short-sighted as, despite the comic dissection of this character, there are at least two opposing angles from which Anwar – and every other immigrant character in the novel – can be viewed. In her critique of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, O'Shea-Meddour claims that it is due to the one-sidedness the novel's portrayals of ethnicity

that critics have produced limited readings of characters such as Anwar: "The novel repeatedly draws attention to the presence of restrictive filters of interpretation, and the reductive ways in which characters make sense of one another. It is therefore ironic that critical responses have been so blinkered" (38). In case of Anwar, his overwhelming commitment to extremist Islam exploited in *The Buddha of Suburbia* has resulted in academic delusion and ignorance of the fact that Anwar is multi-faceted human being, namely "liberal, hedonist, patriarchal, prostitute loving, gambling, capitalist, womanising, pork eating, anti-Muslim, Hindu, alcoholic, and Muslim" (O'Shea-Meddour 37). Whilst I agree with O'Shea-Meddour that Anwar is a far more multi-layered and contradictory character than most critics have suggested, I disagree with her assumption that one-sided portrayals in the novel have resulted in one-sided critical reception. Quite the contrary: the overwhelming presence of politics of aesthetic criteria and the 'burden of representation' have narrowed the critical lens through which scholars have approached Anwar and ethnicity in general. A closer look at the narrative strategies and the versatility of comic effects in *The Buddha of Suburbia* reveals multi-faceted, three-dimensional portraits of all characters including Anwar – a humanist reading that has been overlooked by both minority critics and general academe.

On the one hand, Anwar is depicted as Changez' violently furious father-in-law who "was shuffling down the street towards [Changez], his stick aloft, curses released from his mouth like mad dogs from a kennel … intending to crack his son-in-law over the loaf right now – and possibly club him to death" (*The Buddha* 210). Anwar is beside himself; his plan to import a groom for his daughter Jamila and a son-in-law who would continue his business and carry on the family name has colossally failed. Changez is a cripple who is more interested in reading books and discovering Britain's sexual liberties. Anwar's rage and fanaticism manifests itself in the comic exaggeration of his body movements; his dog-like curses lend his entire appearance the image of a grotesque caricature. Once again Anwar's caricature-like cartoonishness deprives this character of the reader's sympathy; the fact that Anwar is clubbed to death with a knobby dildo is evidential of the novel's outright dismissal of male Muslim fundamentalism (O'Shea-Meddour 47). And yet, other passages allow for more sympathetic portrayals of Anwar, who, at times, speaks reason and comments the ridiculousness of some of the other characters like his friend and Karim's father Haroon. Anwar's pragmatic world-view represents a sober alternative

to Haroon's Eastern hyper-spiritualism and his sense of racist injustice, as can be seen in a conversation in which Anwar rebukes Haroon's spiritual ambitions as nonsense:

> '[The English] don't promote you because you are lazy, Haroon. Barnacles are growing on your balls. You think of some China-thing and not the Queen?' 'To hell with the Queen! Look, Anwar, don't you ever feel you want to know yourself? That you are an enigma to yourself completely?' 'I don't interest anyone else, why should I interest myself?' cried Anwar. 'Get on with living!' (*The Buddha* 27)

In this passage, Anwar is a sarcastic and sympathetic ambassador of a more down-to-earth approach to life, thus being an obvious contrast to the enraged old man chasing his son-in-law in public in the episode discussed before. Haroon's obsession with 'China-things' and his sudden transformation into an exotic and at times ethereal guru collides with Anwar's dismissal of Haroon's new career path ('barnacles … balls') and his pragmatism ('get on with living'), an attitude that even echoes Karim's bewilderment at the fact that his father is now engaged in "concentrat[ing] on the tip of his nose, a large target indeed" (*The Buddha* 28).

Anwar's religious radicalism and the hunger-strike with which he blackmails his family until Jamila gives in to his demands has received enormous critical attention as the novel's repudiation of fundamentalist thinking. However, the fact that Anwar has brought pain and suffering to his family and mostly to himself has been largely overlooked. Drowning his pain in alcohol, Anwar is a broken man: "Anwar's hunger-strike hadn't endeared him to his family, and now no one attended to him or enquired into the state of his cracking heart" (*The Buddha* 208). Void of any humorous potential, Karim's observation lays bare Anwar's human fragility ('cracking heart') caused by the silent dismissal of his daughter and wife. Showing sympathy for his uncle, Karim realizes that Anwar's wife Jeeta in fact takes revenge on her husband by slowly depriving him of laughter and digestive food:

> [Anwar] started to suffer the malnutrition of unalloyed seriousness. Someone to whom jokes are never told soon contracts enthusiasm deficiency. . . . . And the food was especially prepared to ensure constipation. Days went by without hope of relief. 'I am full of shit,' Anwar said to me. (*The Buddha* 208)

Jeeta's treatment of her husband is not nurture, but torture. In a grotesque fashion, Anwar is being exposed to mental and physical 'malnutrition': as much as Jeeta's seriousness deprives Anwar of comic relief, her food constipates Anwar's entire body. In a burst of cynical frustration with his wife and the entire situation, Anwar

laments that he is 'full of shit'. At the mercy of his wife's revenge, Anwar is a far cry from the authoritarian pater familias who has not long ago terrorised his family with radical religiosity. As a matter of fact, this passage accentuates Anwar's suffering and the fact that he is being deprived of love, emanating Karim's sympathy as the only person who listens to his now forsaken uncle.

Even in Anwar's most farcical and grotesque moments, Karim manages to obtain a more balanced point of view at his headstrong uncle. When Anwar starts his absurd "Gandhi diet" (*The Buddha* 60) to force his daughter Jamila to marry the boy that he has selected for her, Karim is infuriated at first: he kicks Anwar's piss-pot, thus spreading urine over Anwar's bed sheets. Only moments later Karim regrets his response: "Hadn't he always been kind to me, Uncle Anwar? Hadn't he always accepted me exactly as I was, and never told me off? . . . . It was irrational of me to hate his irrationality so much that I sprayed piss over his bed" (*The Buddha* 60 f). Karim's realization is void of any sarcasm or mockery directed at Anwar. Instead, his comment radiates his ability to empathize with his uncle despite his blind traditionalism. Karim's regret is illustrative of the fact that *The Buddha of Suburbia* pairs scorn with the recognition of a human spark and truth in every character, regardless of how backward and absurd they are. Despite Karim's readiness to expose the 'dirty laundry' of his uncle in public, the first-person narrator manages to preserve more reconciliatory moments in which Anwar does not appear as a mere caricature but as a human being who does not deserve irrational hatred and blind dismissal.

By the end of the novel and after his death, Anwar is completely uncovered in his human complexity. What the following crucial passage evokes is *not* Anwar's religious traditionalism *nor* his identity as an Asian immigrant in Britain but his humane role as a father alienated from his daughter Jamila:

> There was this piece of heaven, this little girl he'd carried around the shop on his shoulders; and then one day she was gone, replaced by a foreigner, an unco-operative woman he didn't know how to speak to. Being so confused, so weak, so in love, he chose strength and drove her away from himself. The last years he spent wondering where she'd gone, and slowly came to realize that she would never return, and that the husband he'd chosen for her was an idiot. (*The Buddha* 214)

In this passage, Anwar is a far cry from one of the 'least sympathetic' characters in the novel (Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* 128) or a "cultural nationalist" (Moore-Gilbert "Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" 203). Instead, Anwar is exposed

in all his vulnerability as a confused father of a daughter. Interestingly enough, the narrator refrains from markers that would give away Anwar's ethnicity, religious affiliation or even his fundamentalist mindset; instead, this extract evokes the image of a father lost in inter-generational conflicts. The novel suggests that it is precisely this alienation from his daughter that Anwar fails to compensate with 'strength' and an arranged marriage that would re-establish all family ties. In this portrayal, Anwar ceases to embody religious radicalism *per se.* If only posthum, he is depicted as a regretful father admitting in a self-deprecating manner that he has chosen 'an idiot' to be Jamila's husband: a conclusion that reconciles him with Jamila and allows for a moment of redemption. The sobriety and more thoughtful impressions of Anwar's fatherhood collide with his cartoonish fury and elicit the reader's sympathy with a tragicomic character who has come to a deadlock in his obsession and despair to recover family ties with radical means.

In an unpublished interview with Susan Fischer, Kureishi states that the political or moral appropriateness of literary portrayals has always represented a major issue in the reception of his work. Regardless of the group or ethnicity in Kureishi's literary focus, the author argues that he has always been confronted with criticisms of how to deliver suitable depictions. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the at times aggressive comic tone reflects Kureishi's statement at the beginning of this section that black and Asian characters in the novel are 'not nice'. Via comic effects, the novel exposes and exploits the absurdity of minority characters, thus demolishing the 'burden of expectation' as a paralysing concept that prevents critical approaches towards immigrant experience. Stereotyping, caricature and grotesque assist the novel in its dismissal of sugar-coated portraits of immigrants communities; they also reveal the absurdity of the notion of a unified black/Asian/immigrant experience. Still, in the midst of sharpest derision and critique, there is room for empathy that allows for a human perspective on how irrational and yet how deeply troubled immigrant characters like Anwar are. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, non-white ethnic characters are not only debunked as 'irrational, ridiculous, hysterical, and fanatical' (*The Buddha* 180), they are also suffering rejected love and alienation from family members that drive them towards radical solutions. This literary focus on (and mockery of) human weaknesses of ethnic characters disqualifies *The Buddha of Suburbia* as an empowering novel in the post-colonial sense of the term. Underneath the ethnicity and minority status of the novel's characters lies a perturbed humanity.

2.3 A Case for Universalism in *The Buddha of Suburbia*

I think we're the centre of the human project, and I think every writer would be interested in that too.

- Hanif Kureishi[51]

Reading Kureishi as a universalist writer is a position that departs from the predominant tendency of interpreting his work through the post-colonial lens. With the help of comic effects in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi pursues the universalist goal of exploring and exposing weaknesses in human nature.[52] As these comic effects are implemented through textual incongruities and uttered by the flamboyant narrative voice of Kureishi's first-person narrator, Karim Amir is the narrative executor of Kureishi's universalist stance. In many of his interviews, Hanif Kureishi has insisted upon his curiosity and engagement in what he refers to as 'the human project', namely the literary negotiation of universal human themes, the motivations behind human behaviour and the complex and self-destructive quality of the human character (qtd. in Buchanan 118). Critics such as Kaleta (1998) or Buchanan (2007) point to the 'universality of Kureishi's work' claiming that *The Buddha of Suburbia* portrays the universal truth of a human world falling into the chaos of egomania and corruption. Kaleta is one of the first critics to have proposed this perspective in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. At first, Kaleta denounces Karim's attempts to emancipate himself from his ethnic background as assimilationist conformism and craving for power in the white and privileged London scene (179). On the other hand, he acknowledges that "[a]ll [Kureishi's] characters, Asians, Anglos, and Anglo-Asians alike, dream of traveling the distance between being an outsider and becoming an insider" (Kaleta 205 f). According to Kaleta, the novel does not romanticize either group or ethnicity as impeccable, because "crime, greed, and materialism, like honor and intelligence, come in all colors, shapes, and persuasions in [the novel's] pluralistic society" (220). Furthermore, Kaleta argues that all characters in the novel suffer from hybrid in-betweenness and an unstable identity that requires compensation, which, for Kaleta, is indicative of the novel's "appreciation of the humanity" and "the universality of [Kureishi's] work" (5).

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[51] qtd. in Bradley Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 118.

[52] I have introduced this idea in my paper at the conference "In Analysis: The Work of Hanif Kureishi" at Roehampton University in February 2012.

Consequently, the portrayals in *The Buddha of Suburbia* carry in them universal principles that go beyond the context of the characters and the specific events in the novel: "Aware of the past and unflinching in his assessment of the present, Kureishi writes stories that present the universal truths underlying the idiosyncratic activities of his unconventional characters" (Kaleta 16).

What I consider particularly valuable in Kaleta's argument is the impartiality with which Kureishi's narrator comically attacks his environment and himself. First of all, all characters equally share positive as well as negative traits: the novel refrains from both idealizations and demonizations of human beings. However, all characters are comically dissected in their portrayals; as such, they all represent targets of Karim's narrative scorn in equal measure. The British society as it is depicted in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a cosmos in which despicable and absurd facets of human nature are the norm. Buchanan lists a catalogue of human follies innate to all of the novel's characters, including: corruption, cruelty, self-centeredness, short-sightedness, sexism, homophobia, racism, self-hatred and self-sabotage (Buchanan 163 f). The critic concludes that the novel's agenda to capture human foolishness is an attempt to face humanity at its worst. Buchanan sees a didactic mission behind this approach in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, as the readers "are forced to recognize the many traits [they] share with [Kureishi's characters] and consider the degree to which [they] share in their degradation" (ibid. 164). As *The Buddha of Suburbia* takes inventory of the downside of human affairs maintaining thereby an all-encompassing perspective, it counters those concepts of identity that ignore human commonalities and insist upon firm and separate categories.

> Kureishi's fiction does suggest that because of the unnecessarily isolationist, antagonistic stances of identity theorists, humanity has become fragmented into artificially oppositional categories. For Kureishi, our differences – be they due to gender, psychological makeup, geography, religion or age – are less significant than they might seem. (Buchanan 15)

For Kureishi, racial binaries such as white/non-white, minority/mainstream or left-wing/right-wing fade into the background in the face of his actual interests. The author states that, for him, human sexuality, self-destructiveness, split identity and social and economic conflicts are the major matters of his aesthetic concern (qtd. in Buchanan 118). Regardless of all the racial, cultural, social, religious and categories that widen the gap between his characters, Kureishi stresses that restlessness is a trait that all of his characters have in common (qtd. Buchanan 112). Consequently, when

asked in an interview whether he sees himself as a humanist writer, Kureishi responds that, in his writing, he poses and dramatizes the same question as thematised in for instance Chekhov's or Wilde's humanist writing, namely "[w]hat are men and women doing?" (qtd. in Buchanan 119).

It is obvious that Kureishi's interest in the turmoil of the 'human project' and his novel's all-embracing universalist perspective directly collide with major post-colonial concerns. Claiming a humanist and universalist perspective inherent in Kureishi's writing is a difficult thing; as I have shown in the chapter on humanism and universalism, these two notions represent conceptual (and ideological) antipoles to post-colonial theory. While humanism focuses on the idea of "common kinship and unity of mankind" based upon a shared "dignity of man, his individualism, [and] the uniqueness and value of his thoughts and experiences" (Kraemer in Al-Dabbagh 80: 5), post-colonial theory and discourse has opposite priorities. Its agenda consists in uncovering and tackling asymmetries between those in power and the marginalised. Drawing once more from Ball's terminology, post-colonial thought and theory is engaged in modes of 'oppositionality' against post-imperial oppression and 'referentiality' or agency in the name of the subjected Other (Ball 2). In contrast to that, universalism and humanism represent attempts to establish a common ground for human experience. This obvious difference is even sharpened by the outright dismissal of universalist and humanist postulates by post-colonial theorists. Edward Said questions the fair-mindedness of the present-day modern humanist universalism, claiming that it represents a political alibi for the expansion of imperialist globalism and Western values (qtd. in Al-Dabbagh 77). In a similarly critical fashion, critics such as Ranasinha and Yousaf are highly suspicious of universalism and humanism as agendas in artistry and literary writing. They both criticise these concepts as political and commercial strategies imposed upon minority artists by the dominant cultural mainstream. In her analysis of Kureishi and South-Asian writers in contemporary Britain, Ranasinha recapitulates the demands of the metropolitan centre of power directed at minority writers to adapt the standardised universalist and humanist themes of the white English literary canon. For Ranasinha,

> [t]his amounts to Eurocentrism, masked as the 'universality' of the human condition that neglects the local socio-political context of the country of 'origin' and conceals the refusal of Western audiences to engage with the unfamiliar. It results in de-radicalised, ahistorical readings (Ranasinha 10).

Ranasinha discusses universalism as a compulsory agenda imposed upon minority artists and writers in order to conform to Western aesthetics and the taste of the Western recipients. Her objection goes back to Said's examination of Orientalist thinking, according to which, the post-war liberal humanism was neo-colonial in disguise, as it represented "a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world" (Said 12, emphasis in the original). In addition to Ranasinha's objections, Yousaf claims that attempts of (white) reviewers to categorize Kureishi as a universalist writer are a strategy to reassure readers that *The Buddha of Suburbia* does not advocate minority interests thereby denying its ethnic specificity: "At its worst, 'universal' has become a coded way of expressing that with which white westerners can empathize so that ethnic specifics are rendered superficial" (Yousaf 61). Both critics perceive ethnicity and the minority status of a writer as irreconcilable with a universalist approach in his or her writing. From their point of view, humanism and universalism simply equate 'Eurocentrism'[53]. Universalist writing is considered an insistence made by Western audiences and critics and a concession made by the minority writer to meet the commercial and aesthetic needs of the Western mainstream cultural production.

However, the claim that minority writers should refrain from universalist perspectives is as imperative as the request that they should adopt and thematize human values from the English literary canon. In this antagonistic debate, universalist writing is either a Eurocentric directive or a post-colonial taboo; Kureishi's universalism, however, is a far cry from both positions. *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s universalist approach to the core of human nature is not to be understood as an idealistic theory that promotes a catalogue of human values (or Western and Eurocentric values for that matter). Rather, it is an inclination to explore and expose human flaws and inconsistencies. The novel does not promote ideal universal values that determine how individuals *should* be; rather, *The Buddha of Suburbia* uncovers how troubled, inconsistent and hypocritical individuals *are*. It is the comic potential lying within human faults and weaknesses that unites the characters in *The Buddha*

[53] Julien defines Eurocentrism as an agenda that "assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural variants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution, but it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time" (qtd. in Al-Dabbagh 87: 230).

of Suburbia under the umbrella of a troubled and ludicrous humanity. That is why comic effects are crucial for the humanist and universalist agenda of the novel; irony, satire, or caricature-like exaggeration are only some of the techniques that bring human flaws and weaknesses to the surface. The impartiality of Karim's scorn reflects *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s universalist perspective. The novel is permeated by a humorous disposition that strongly resembles the Bachtinian carnivalesque in which the entire world is worthy of ridicule. The nature of the medieval carnival is in as far universal, as the carnivalesque mockery is directed "against everything and everyone …, [and] the entire world appears comic, and is perceived and apprehended under the aspects of its ridiculousness and its humoristic relativity" (Bachtin 60, my translation). The essence of Bachtinian universal mockery is mirrored in Karim's comic view of the world and his propensity to ridicule and satirise 'everything and everyone' that crosses his path. In doing so, the first-person narrator critically unlocks and comments on dubious and inconsistent behaviour and thinking in his friends, mentors, family, colleagues and strangers – and himself.

Racism, hatred and suspicion of others represents a central theme in *The Buddha of Suburbia.* Yet the image of racism in Kureishi's novel disharmonizes with the post-colonial understanding of colonial Othering and present-day racial discrimination of non-white subjects. Rather, it stands for a human blemish immanent to all characters in the novel. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, racism is not a 'white' but a universal human affair. When critics such as Morrison state that, in Britain, "it is clear that in the public sphere … race-thinking simply fails to go away" (59), this statement does not only apply to continuous open or clandestine racist thinking in the white majority mainstream. Racism in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is an all-encompassing phenomenon that permeates all segments of society and operates both in mainstream and minority cultures. Comic effects play a vital role in the novel's exploration of racial hatred and discrimination as they uncover xenophobia as a ubiquitous human disposition. Satire, irony and comic contradictions are textual signs that direct the reader towards a character's racist attitude. It is important to note that, as racism can be found within every social group and individual in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, this leaves no room for innocence. Racism ceases to exist as a 'domain' of white people only. The novel does not only thematize neo-colonial images still present in London's theatre scene or more subtle forms of racism such as left-wing liberal patronization and the need for an exotic Other, it also unveils racism and

discrimination visible within ethnic minority communities. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, virtually every character is prone to mechanisms of 'Othering' and racial or ethnic discrimination.

Karim's racist encounters with Hairy Back, Shadwell and Matthew Pyke have been sufficiently discussed in the previous sections; I will now focus on other forms of what Moore-Gilbert calls "metropolitan racism" ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" 201), namely various manifestations of racist or Orientalist thinking in Kureishi's London. Karim's relatives Ted and Jean, for instance, embody Moore-Gilbert's conception of open racism ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" 201). The narrative portrayal of Ted and Jean is dominated by caricature-like effects. Karim's relatives epitomize white middle-class habitus strongly disturbed by the fact that the non-white Indian Haroon, Karim's father, has married into the family. In the following passage, 'Gin and Tonic', as Haroon calls them, crash a suburban spiritual gathering only to find their brother-in-law Haroon surrounded by a handful of devotees:

> There they were – two normal unhappy alcoholics, her in pink high heels, him in a double-breasted suit, dressed for a wedding, almost innocently walking into a party. . . . . And they were clapped in the eyeballs by their brother-in-law, known as Harry, lowering himself into a yogic trance in front of their neighbours. Jean fought for words, perhaps the only thing she had ever fought for. . . . . Jean's mouth closed slowly, like Tower Bridge. (*The Buddha* 33)

As with Hairy Back, Karim operates with caricature and cartoonishness to sketch the couple's appearance ('unhappy alcoholics', 'pink high heels', 'dressed for a wedding') at the exotic gathering. Visual effects and exaggerated facial expressions dominate Jean and Ted's ludicrous countenance. 'Clapped in the eyeballs' at the sight they encounter, Jean and Ted are speechless; in her bewilderment, Jean finally closes her mouth 'like the Tower Bridge'. All these effects boost the ridiculousness of the couple; however, they are also indicative of Jean and Ted's intolerance and embarrassment for their brother-in-law's spiritual career. Later in the novel, Karim is confronted with Jean and Ted's faked anxiety about how Haroon's new life as a Buddha might affect the reputation and the respectability of the family. Jean attempts to win over Karim against his father's new activity by complaining that this might have a negative impact on their business, 'Peter's Heaters'. Karim is little impressed by his aunt's morality and sudden concern for family ties. He deliberately misunderstands most of her cross-examination, during which he even produces a fart

"that needed to be free" (*The Buddha* 44). Karim's response to 'Gin and Tonic's' allegedly well-meant is a vulgar disruption of Jean and Ted's shallow middle-class integrity and faked concern for the family. As Holmes suggests, Karim's fart is "an assault … on his aunt's pretensions to refinement and exalted social status" and on their "imperialistic, racially exclusive definition of Britishness" (650). In this scene, the slapstick nature of Karim's low manners counters and exposes Ted and Jean's racism glossed over by middle-class sanctimony.

While Ted and Jean's racial attitudes are uncovered by cartoonishness and Karim's 'slapstick fart', characters such as Helen or Eleanor are less easily pinned down. Moore-Gilbert points to the fact that their racism is more subliminal ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" 201) and thus requires a different kind of comic exposure. Helen for instance, displays a latent tendency to exoticize others combined with multiculturalist tolerance:

> Helen took Dad's [Haroon's] hand and patted it comfortingly. 'But this is your home,' she said. 'We like you being here. You benefit our country with your traditions.' Jamila raised her eyes to heaven. Helen was driving her to suicide, I could see that. Helen just made me laugh … . (*The Buddha* 74)

Helen's well-meant multiculturalist tolerance relies on automatised buzzwords and a patronising attitude towards Haroon and other immigrants. Or as Moore-Gilbert puts it: "Implicit in Helen's attitudes is a conception of multiculturalism which accepts difference only *in relation to* a centre, the normative cultural authority of which remains essentially undisturbed" (*Hanif Kureishi* 138, emphasis in the original). Helen's tolerance consists entirely of multiculturalist platitudes ('you benefit our country') that contain a racial nucleus; opposing binaries such as 'we'/'you' and 'our country'/'your traditions' permeate her speech, thus pointing to a mechanism of an in essence Orientalist 'Othering', sugar-coated by her benevolence and fascination for Haroon's cultural background. Put in Bergson's terms (9), Helen is an 'absentminded' character unaware of how much her tolerance is infused by racial binaries and latent xenophobia: Haroon can claim Britain as his home only because 'we like you here'. Helen's ethnic altruism reveals that Haroon's presence in Britain is never 'natural' or taken for granted but depends on the sympathy of the native population. Her outspoken profession of her tolerance is countered by Jamila's inner aggressiveness and frustration expressed through ostentatious eye-rolling. Karim, however, is amused by the ridiculousness of Helen's quasi-tolerant paroles.

Eleanor, Karim's second girlfriend, originates from an upper social class that

collects items of exotic value to display them in their homes. Moore-Gilbert points to this fetish of the upper class to exoticize and possess non-Western pieces of art and folklore "often accompanied by ignorance, or even plain ethnocentrism" (*Hanif Kureishi* 138). According to Said, ownership of the exotic and the unknown does not only signify the materialistic possession of an item, it also stands for a right to supremacy over this item: "[A] white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it" (Said 108). The ownership of the Oriental Other is a vivid example for dehumanization, as the Othered subject is literally turned into an item of commodification legally owned by its white master and possessor (Said 108). Eleanor's bedroom is an expression of one such colonial legacy of ownership of the exotic. Next to Eleanor's "lacquered boxes on the dresser [and] the silk cushion from Thailand" (*The Buddha* 186) stands a gold-framed photograph of her former lover Gene, a handsome and talented actor with Indian background. It is almost cynical to spot a picture of Eleanor's Indian romance exhibited in the vicinity of items of exotic collector's value. Realising that Gene has committed suicide in the face of unbearable everyday discrimination, Karim becomes aware of the fact that he might meet the same fate as yet another one of Eleanor's ill-fated lovers. Karim is right; Eleanor begins a prestigious romance with the theatre eminence Matthew Pyke:

> She preferred Pyke. Sweet Gene, her black lover, London's best mime, who emptied bed-pans in hospital soaps, killed himself because every day, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being. And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all its self-regard – into the eye of Hairy Back, into the eye of the Great Fucking Dane. We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. (*The Buddha* 227)

In a line of thought completely lacking humorous impulses, Karim recalls Gene, Eleanor's dead lover who has suffered under the dehumanising force of racial injustice to the point of self-annihilation. Gene represents Karim's tragic alter ego: a talented actor who has capitulated in the face of the overpowering racist rejection of his environment: "The implication of Gene's death for Karim is clear: if Karim cannot find his own role to play in British society, whether onstage or off, he too is doomed" (Buchanan 50). Karim is spared Gene's fatal destiny because he has adopted the strategy of bowing to stereotypes that denote race and culture to accommodate himself in a rather hostile society – a challenge that Gene has not been

able to overcome (Buchanan 50). Gene is certainly a tragically victimised Other; yet Buchanan correctly states that Gene's doom notwithstanding, *The Buddha of Suburbia* offers no clear-cut and unambiguous portrayals of race and class (50). In the same breath, the passage evokes the ambition of 'defiant' immigrants who have come to England to 'pursue its roses' and 'possess their kindness and beauty'. This image breaks with the conventional assumption that colonial ownership is a one-way street, put on display only by white colonisers and white middle-class Westerners (Said 108). The narrator takes into account the overwhelming presence of the Empire and its legacy personified by Hairy Back or Matthew Pyke. On the other hand, Karim presents the opposite side of a collective immigrant 'we', who want to possess England in a similarly colonial fashion. As with all portrayals of racism in *The Buddha*, this passage turns down clear-cut antagonisms between perpetrator and victim: immigrants may have to face the evil eye of the Empire, but they are also in pursuit of 'English roses'. Karim's reference to the immigrant 'we' fans itself out in those who have made it in England, those who proudly stand outside of it and those who have been entirely rejected by it. Due to the lack of comic disruption in this passage, I argue that it exemplifies what Attardo considers 'serious relief': an interference of seriousness in an otherwise predominantly comic text (89). This passage is emblematic for *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s portrayal of racism and Othering as an ever-continuous phenomenon in post-imperial Britain. It also reflects Kureishi's conviction that "colonialism hasn't come to an end … . We're still thinking about it. Colonialism has entered all our heads, it's part of our minds. And we have to think about it when we think about what kind of country we want to live in" (qtd. in MacCabe 45). Karim's collective 'we' has an all-including impetus; it encloses both the former colonisers and the colonised along with their descendant generations in present-day Britain. This collectiveness (or universality) of colonialist thinking is visible in Karim's above contemplation of the consequences of racial discrimination and neo-imperial ownership.

Racism and 'Othering' in London is not only visible in plays in London's theatre scene and in bedrooms with colonial decoration, it is an ever-present phenomenon in all segments of London's society. Virtually every character displays racist or xenophobic attitudes that are equally satirised in the text. Racist slurs and xenophobia also circulate among minority groups, as is the case with Karim's uncle Anwar. Anwar swears at Karim's white girlfriend Helen whenever she approaches

him: "Pork, pork, pork, VD, VD, white woman, white woman" (*The Buddha* 84 f). Anwar's assaults appear an anti-white mantra that aims at the mainly Christian religious practice of white people and the allegedly promiscuous corruption of their Western lifestyle. For critics such as Moore-Gilbert, the comic portrayal of Anwar stands for the novel's narrative critique of 'rejectionism', cultural nationalism and the return to cultural awareness and solidarity among ethnic minority groups in order to create a front against white racism ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* 203). Indeed, Anwar's return to tradition and religious awareness results in hostility towards anything Western that might threaten his traditional lifestyle. His words and behaviour reveal a peculiar resemblance with the right-wing racist Hairy Back who has abused Karim in a similar manner. Anwar's mechanical and repeated barks at Helen echo Hairy Back's racist slurs at Karim such as "[w]e don't want you blackies coming to the house" (*The Buddha* 40). Anwar's scorn for Helen and Hairy Back's abuse of Karim point to cultural essentialisms on both sides of Britain's cultural makeup: both the white mainstream and its non-white minority counterpart prioritize clear-cut boundaries between black and white and consolidate themselves through hatred and contempt against non-members of the group.

Even the most sympathetic characters in the novel are mocked for their notorious contempt against other immigrants and minorities. Changez, Karim's friend who has recently immigrated to Britain himself attacks his fellow countrymen:

> And Changez, if I knew my Changez, would be abusing any Pakistanis and Indians he saw in the street. 'Look at that low-class person,' he'd say in a loud voice, stopping and pointing out one of his fellow countrymen … . 'Yes, they have souls, but the reason there is this bad racialism is because they are so dirty, so rough-looking, so bad-mannered. And they are wearing such strange clothes for the Englishman, turbans and all. To be accepted they must take up the English ways and forget their filthy villages! They must decide to be either here or there. Look how much here I am! And why doesn't that bugger over there look the Englishman in the eye! No wonder the Englishman will hit him!'" (*The Buddha* 210)

Changez despises immigrant backwardness as a trait that provokes 'bad racialism' as immigrants enforce their Otherness by separating themselves from the English way of life. Changez' tirade is permeated by binaries that echo Said's notion of the modern and civilised Occident and its backward antipode, the Orient. It also invokes antagonisms between the English 'here' and the Asian 'there', between middle-class urbanity and low-class peasantry, and between the modernity of a civilised Britain

and the backwardness of Asian traditionalism.[54] Keeping Changez' reasoning in mind, it is ironic that, despite his confidence as a fully assimilated British individual, Changez is attacked by the National Front and afterwards discriminated by the police, proving once more Kaleta's statement that, "Kureishi's England is a racist society" (205). Changez' disgust at immigrant backwardness is complicated by the dimension of class and social hierarchy; it is comparable to the attitude of Karim's English mother Margaret, who, having married Karim's father, stresses his aristocratic background and the fact that he is different from the Indian peasants immigrating to Britain in the 1960s who, as Karim lets the reader know, were unfamiliar with both cutlery and toilets, since "they squatted on the seats and shat from on high" (*The Buddha* 24). Changez' bias and Margaret's dismissal testify to the novel's extended conception of racism beyond racial inequality, enhanced by class divisions and social lifestyle. Race and class issues are interconnected in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Buchanan 15 f); racial bigotry is aggravated by social and economic factors according to which immigrants are not only the cultural, but also the social and the economic Other. According to Kureishi,

> [r]acism goes hand-in-hand with class inequality. Among other things, racism is a kind of snobbery, a desire to see oneself as superior culturally and economically, and a desire to actively experience and enjoy that superiority by hostility or violence. ("The Rainbow Sign" 46)

Kureishi's statement is reflected in *The Buddha of Suburbia* as Changez imagines himself to rank higher than other immigrants in social, economic and cultural terms. Margaret also is at pains to highlight her husband's social and cultural sophistication over the Other(ed) immigrants who on any account fall short of manners, education and Western civility.

As a universal, all-encompassing theme of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, racism does not even bypass those whom the post-colonial theory considers the new 'Other' of xenophobia: hybrid individuals. Put more simply, even hybrid individuals themselves are racist. Karim's brother Allie, who "call[s] himself Allie to avoid racial trouble" (*The Buddha* 19), epitomizes multi-directional racial hatred despite the fact he, as Karim, has a white lower-class English mother and an Indian upper-class father. Not only does Allie despise left-wing liberals because of their 'idealistic

[54] Binaries such as urban/rural, civilised/primitive and modern/static are antitheses that dominant cultures use against peripheral (mostly immigrant) groups to indicate their superiority (Davies 83).

politics' and because "their clothes look like rags" (*The Buddha* 267), he detests "people who go on all the time about being black, and how persecuted they were at school, and how someone spat at them once" (*The Buddha* 267). Ultimately, Allie is grateful for not being white either, as he does not like the look of white skin (*The Buddha* 268). Allie's racial, cultural and social in-betweenness leads to a hyphenated identity that seems to display the same kind of rigid thinking and exclusion of others as the xenophobia and hostility stemming from hermetic cultural systems. In other words, not even hybrid individuals like Allie are immune to hatred and exclusion. Yasmin Hussain points to this hazardous nature of hybridity with the celebration of in-betweenness and a hyphenated status "could easily shift to an essential category, having continuity in time and space and thus undermining its relational character" (13). For Allie, his own hybridity seems to be the superior principle that prevents him from sympathising with black or white subjects (or any other position, for that matter).

Eventually, the (hybrid) narrator himself falls into the racist trap that characterises the narrow-mindedness and teenage ignorance of his entire generation: "At my school they taught you a bit of French, but anyone who attempted to pronounce a word correctly was laughed down. On a trip to Calais we attacked a Frog behind a restaurant" (*The Buddha* 177). Having been attacked as 'Paki' or 'wog' himself on many occasions, it is striking that Karim does not hesitate to use a derogatory word for the French, namely 'Frog' nor to join his peers in racial assaults. Surrounded by the delusional rawness of a young generation that solidifies its group identity by taking pride in ignorance, ethnic name-calling and racist violence against others, even Karim falls prey to its mantras:

> By this ignorance we knew ourselves to be superior to the public-school kids, with their puky uniforms and leather briefcases, and Mummy and Daddy waiting outside in the car to pick them up. . . . . We were proud of never learning anything except the names of footballers, the personnel of rock groups and the lyrics of 'I am the Walrus'. What idiots we were! How misinformed! (*The Buddha* 177 f)

As many times in the novel, racism serves as a device for class division and lifestyle distinction: by means of brutality and celebrated ignorance, the youngsters set themselves apart from the 'puky uniforms' of the middle-class snobbishness. The narrator cynically comments on the backwardness of his generation when he comes to realize the 'misinformed idiocy' behind adolescent beliefs. At the same time, Karim counts himself in; as much as he pursues 'English roses' with the rest of the

immigrants coming to Britain (*The Buddha* 227), Karim now identifies with a generation of white British youngster delinquents who feel superior by the racial hatred and cultural ignorance they deliberately put on display. He may be hybrid, but Karim is also prone to neo-colonial ownership and racial discrimination of other ethnicities. In this disposition, he does not differ from Eleanor's claim to possess the exotic nor does he jar with Hairy Back's brutality. In a world riddled with neo-colonial thinking, racial discrimination and cultural ignorance, not even *The Buddha*'s 'herald of hybridity' is immune to these deficiencies that clearly come under attack in post-colonial discourse in which hybridity is held as a bulwark against racism. White, non-white *and* hybrid characters alike, all reach for determinist categories of cultural difference and superiority with which they discriminate against or openly attack their respective Other.

The world that surrounds Karim is not only quintessentially racist, it is also inhabited by hybrid[55] characters whose identities zig-zag and fluctuate, compounded by at times entirely opposite roles. Naturally, several critics[56] consent to the idea that *The Buddha of Suburbia* promotes constant transformation and identity mutability with Karim as its "herald of hybridity" (Schoene, "Herald of Hybridity" 117). However, a closer look at the comic effects that pervade portrayals of identities reveals hybridity as human constant that causes pain, restlessness and anxiety; comic effects assist the comic disruption and re-negotiation of hybridity in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Hybridity in Kureishi's novel is a problematic idea[57] denoting a human condition that goes beyond Bhabha's post-colonial understanding of this term.

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[55] Kureishi understands hybridity as a human and therefore not essentially post-colonial parameter: "[H]ybridity [is] everywhere, there has always been. Look at a child with a mother and a father, and is composed, therefore, as Freud wrote, of at least two genders, and the pulling together of these genders into a sexuality and so on. And in fact these parents have come from different places psychologically, so there's a lot of hybridity going on all the time, if you think of hybridity as meaning the putting together of disparate things. . . . . But it's usually used in terms of black and white" (qtd. in Buchanan 119).

[56] Oubechou (1997); Doyle (1997); Knopp (2009).

[57] That hybridity is a problematic concept in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is an objection made by several critics: Jones argues that, due to his hybridity, Karim is susceptible to influences and attacks from individuals and groups that insist on rigid categories of race, culture, gender, etc. (94); Nasta proposes that Karim's playfulness and performance of his hybrid identity is often enough blocked by his close-minded environment (193); and finally, Moore-Gilbert concludes that "*The Buddha* provides a sobering perspective on the optimism expressed in both Said's *Culture and Imperialism* and Bhabha's *Location of Culture* about the possibilities of a new, non-conflictual and non-hierarchical inter- and *intra*-cultural dispensation" ("Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*" 205). In other words, Karim's mutability as a hybrid individual is often severely limited by the rigidness of the system he finds himself in. Whilst I accede to these criticisms of the limitedness of hybridity, my focus lies on hybridity as universal anxiety that raises human inconsistencies to the surface.

The novel carries to the finish the question what happens in an entirely hybridised world in which all determinants of race, culture, class, sexuality and gender are abrogated and 'all bets are off'. Hybridity, therefore, is not an end in itself, it is a point of departure for every character in Kureishi's novel to stand out and make a visible statement in a sea of lifestyles and cultural arbitrariness. Unlike the other two novels in my analysis, *The Buddha of Suburbia* rarely focuses on the conflict between hybridity and belonging: the characters at hand do not prioritize havens of homeliness in which they gain a better understanding of themselves and find a place in their world. Instead, they are impelled by their hybrid selves to make themselves 'conspicuous' (*The Buddha* 158) and protrude from the mass of hybrid identities and lifestyles in the 1970s London. Whenever the characters transform and change their lifestyles, it is ostentatious and made visible to their environment. Kaleta observes a certain restlessness with which all characters work towards continuous self-realization and acknowledgment of their environment: "All … characters, Asians, Anglos, and Anglo-Asians alike, dream of traveling the distance between being an outsider and becoming an insider" (205 f). In order to become 'insiders', all characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* almost compulsively re-invent themselves, yet remain with a mouldy feeling of discontent and a lack of self-consciousness. The novel underpins this hybrid human restlessness with a comic mode that questions this practice of obsessive hybridisation and exposes a range of weaknesses, inconsistencies and hypocrisies with which hybridisation is undertaken.

Self-exoticisation is one of the techniques to stand out in a hybrid crowd, as Haroon's new career path shows. Having abandoned the Civil Service, Haroon obtains a new identity by performing the role of an Eastern eccentric and spiritual guru:

> He [Haroon] was certainly exotic, probably the only man in southern England at that moment (apart, possibly, from George Harrison) wearing a red and gold waistcoat and Indian pyjamas. He was also graceful, a front-room Nureyev beside the other pasty-faced Arbuckles with their tight drip-dry shirts glued to their guts and John Collier grey trousers with the crotch all sagging and creased. Perhaps Daddio really was a magician, having transformed himself by the bootlaces (as he put it) from being an Indian in the Civil Service who was always cleaning his teeth with Monkey Brand black toothpowder manufactured by Nogi & Co. of Bombay, into the wise adviser he now appeared to be. Sexy Sadie! Now he was the centre of the room. (*The Buddha* 31)

Haroon's desire to finally be 'the centre of the room' or, as Kaleta puts it, to become an 'insider' (205) results in a shrill performance of a spiritual leader who leaves his dull existence behind. Haroon's outfit is hybrid as it is comically incongruous; a mixture between George Harrison and 'a front-room Nureyev', Haroon remains an exaggerated and excessively exotic figure. Karim is torn between his fascination with his father's transformation and his suspicion of this development in his father's personality. The way Karim refers to Haroon as 'God' (*The Buddha* 21) leaves the reader in suspense over Karim's dismissal or genuine admiration in the light of his father's new identity. Karim himself is eager to uncover an authentic core behind his father's new image; he notices that his father's pompous appearance impresses his followers but is unsure about the quality of the spiritual message behind Haroon's affectation (*The Buddha* 22). After all, his disciples are following the spiritual path of a man who cannot find his way "to places that were a hundred yards away in an area where he'd lived for almost two decades" (*The Buddha* 7). The novel poses the question whether Haroon's slipping in and out of roles as a technique of 'becoming an insider' leads to a better understanding of self, a newly found authenticity and abolition of feelings of estrangement; however, it does not give clear answers. While Ross claims that Haroon's authenticity is both mutable and debatable (239), Thomas and Buchanan acknowledge positive ramifications for Haroon's understanding of self and the world. For Susie Thomas, Haroon's posing as a guru eventually brings meaning to his life and life of others, thus contributing to Haroon's self-development (*Hanif Kureishi* 67); Buchanan argues that Haroon succeeds in using "inauthenticity as a tool of progress" by eventually convincing Karim of his power to appear credible in his transformations (44). Without doubt, Haroon exemplifies re-invention and hybridization of identity in an illustrious manner. Yet, what is left of Haroon's posing as an identity practice besides impressing his son Karim? As Haroon and Eva celebrate their wedding announcement in a chic restaurant, Haroon is deeply affected to find out that his ex-wife and Karim's mother Margaret now leads a happy life with another man. Karim notices Haroon's consternation with a note of sarcastic bitterness:

> [His] resentment was going deep. . . . . Was it only now, after all this time, that he realized the decision to leave our mother was irrevocable? Perhaps only now could he believe it wasn't a joke or game or experiment, that Mum wasn't waiting at home for him with curry and chapatis in the oven and the electric blanket on. (*The Buddha* 281)

What Karim sarcastically comments on is that despite his newly found spiritual path, his marriage with Eva, and a reasonable financial safety, Haroon is left with a feeling of deep dissatisfaction. After all, his eccentricism has taken aback his entire family, permanently estranged him from his son Allie and led to divorce from Margaret. This passage exemplifies how hybrid transformations of identity – as innovative and creative they may be – entail serious consequences. Rooting oneself out of familiar contexts of family, marriage and belonging for the sake of identity development engenders regret, resentment and inner discords. Haroon's new hybrid identity is pretentious, eccentric, and a one-way track at the expense of other integral parts of his identity.

To become 'the centre of the room' (*The Buddha* 31) is an ambition that is zealously pursued by conspicuous and showy demeanour. Whereas Haroon accomplishes it with the help of quirky exoticism, other characters reach for more grotesque transformations of their own selves. To accentuate his appearance as an eccentric theatre director and everybody's darling, Shadwell, one of the least sympathetic characters of the novel, puts his homosexuality on display and combines it with ragged outfits and nervous twitches, thus drawing the attention of an entire party room:

> Shadwell seemed to know everyone. He was standing at the door, greeting people as they came in, simpering and giggling and asking them how so-and-so was. He was being totally homosexual too, except that even that was a pose, a ruse, a way of self-presentation. And he was, as always, a picture of health, dressed in black rags and black boots and twitching maniacally. His face was white, his skin scrofulous, his teeth decaying. (*The Buddha* 133)

Shadwell's 'ruse' is to portray a bohemian and yet grotesque homosexual. Being the giggling life of a party, Shadwell wears his homosexuality as a tag visible for everyone; even 'twitching' appears to be a part of his performance. The grotesque nature of Shadwell's posture is dramatised by the blackness of his outfit and the textual spotlight on Shadwell's degenerate body that Karim mockingly describes as a 'picture of health' – an unequivocal signal of the narrator's antipathy and dismissal of Shadwell's posture. Eva, Haroon's new lover and Karim's 'stepmother', reaches for a similar strategy: she orchestrates her new profession as an interior designer in highly distorted photographs of herself: "[The photographer] photographed Eva only in poses which she found uncomfortable and in which she looked unnatural. She pushed her fingers back through her hair a hundred times, and pouted and opened her eyes wide as if her lids had been pinned" (*The Buddha* 262). Eva's attempts to stand

out in her uniqueness and boost her career result in excessive and 'unnatural' gestures and ludicrous facial deformation; even her descriptions of her work "sound[ed] like the construction of Notre Dame" (*The Buddha* 262). As Shadwell, Eva makes excessive use of shrill costuming that has an alienating effect on her entire appearance. Attending one of her spiritual parties, Karim hardly recognizes Eva in her kaftan and "eyes [darkened] with kohl so she looked like a panda" (*The Buddha* 9). The first-person narrator perceives Eva as a "human crop-sprayer" and is torn between the originality of Eva's appearance and the self-importance with which she puts it on display: "I was trying to think if Eva was the most sophisticated person I'd ever met, or the most pretentious" (*The Buddha* 9). Karim may find Eva's appearance peculiar, but he himself has shown up in a shrill outfit that his mother Margaret finds peculiar to the same extent: "Don't show us up, Karim … You look like Danny LaRue" (*The Buddha* 7). Naturally, Eva is enthusiastic about Karim's appearance: "Karim Amir, you are so exotic, so original! It's such a contribution! It's so you!" All these examples are illustrative of the fact that hybridization and transformation of one's own identity is a constant in *The Buddha of Suburbia.* However, the characters strive for a hybrid extravagance that many times morphs into grotesque, unnatural and ludicrous deformations. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, eccentricity and exoticism appear a direct result of identity metarmophoses; yet, what the novel prioritizes is not the challenge of racial, cultural and other markers through hybridity, but hybridity as an at times preposterous strategy for self-importance and attention of others. In a social arena dominated by self-absorption and driven by desire for attention, all the characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* stage their identity and make it visible for others. Pretentiousness and obsession with catchy identity labels pervades all segments of London's society: marginality, sexuality, cultural exoticism, neuroses, professions, and political stances are only some of the options for the characters to stand out. Karim as the narrator-protagonist functions as a witness and a commentator of this human drive to everlastingly pose and be seen by others. His mocking tone reflects the novel's critical stance towards human pretentiousness oscillating between originality and grotesque ludicrousness.[58]

[58] Karim's mocking tone also mirrors Hanif Kureishi's engagement with this issue: "'These days everyone was insisting on their identity, coming out as a man, woman, gay, black, Jew … as if without a tag they wouldn't be human' ([*The Black*] *Album* 102)" (qtd. in Buchanan 14).

Paired with ambitions to 'dominate the room' is the propensity for self-centeredness visible in many characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Eva's son Charlie, a punk rock star and centre of media attention has mastered the art to make himself conspicuous to others. Wanting to talk about his loneliness in London, Karim observes that Charlie's skill to re-invent and talk about himself culminates in complete self-absorption and the celebration of his neuroses:

> I'd been looking forward to telling Charlie how depressed and lonely I'd been since we moved to London. But before I'd managed a single moan, Charlie pre-empted me. 'I am suicidal,' he announced grandly, as if he were pregnant. He said he was circling in that round of despair where you don't care one iota what happens to you or anyone else. (*The Buddha* 128)

With Charlie, every statement and gesture serves as a strategy of self-aggrandisement. In this scene, Karim compares Charlie's 'outing' of his suicide thoughts to a pregnancy announcement. Charlie even exploits his self-centeredness as a means to get Karim's attention: he is aware of the fact that he 'does not care one iota what happens to anyone else', yet he needs Karim as an admiring spectator of his ignorance of others. Paradoxically enough, Karim needs Charlie to tell him about his own 'loneliness and depression'. Both characters feed on the presence of an audience without which, so it seems, boastful declarations about one's own neuroses would lose their meaning.

As Charlie, Marlene and Matthew Pyke epitomize human self-obsession rampant in the 1970s London:

> With their poking into life's odd corners, Pyke and Marlene seemed to me to be more like intrepid journalists than swimmers in the sensual. Their desire to snuggle up to real life betrayed a basic separation from it. And their obsession with how the world worked just seemed another form of self-obsession. Not that I informed Pyke of this analysis: I merely listened with flared ears and panting lungs. *(The Buddha* 191)

The narrator's criticism (and mockery) of the Pykes is scathing; with a discernible note of sarcasm, Karim dissects Marlene and Matthew Pyke's open and tolerant worldview as a camouflage for self-interest and exploitation of others. That their obsession with life is in fact an obsession with themselves is a wordplay that unmasks the Pykes as a couple that, as Karim has to find out in a sexual orgy, uses other people for their own pleasure. Despite his realization, Karim keeps his judgments to himself: listening with 'flared ears and panting lungs', Karim is oblivious to Pyke's double-mindedness. The young narrator soon realizes that in a world of hypocrites, it is useless to show them their mistakes: when he attempts to

point out to well-off Pyke that, as a left-wing liberal, he has betrayed the working-class, Karim is met with indifference and boredom (*The Buddha* 200).

Besides extravagance and self-obsession, Karim has to face human hypocrisies in himself and in others. Just as they are preoccupied with tags that generate their identities, characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are more than ready to betray whatever worldviews and ideals these tags imply whenever it suits them. Terry, Karim's acting colleague, does not hesitate to profess to the power of the working-class both against racism and the Labour Party (*The Buddha* 149). After Terry becomes Sergeant Monty, the leading star of a police-station drama, Karim discovers how Terry's role and success collides with the anti-racism and support of the working-class that he once stood for: "Terry … investigated the crimes of the rich middle class with the vigour of a political Maigret. . . . . This proved ideologically uncomfortable, since he'd always claimed the police were the fascist instrument of class rule" (*The Buddha* 197). It is ironic that Terry's career gains momentum only after he accepts playing a policeman. For Buchanan, Terry then turns into a hypocrite for the sake of professional success (19). Karim's remark that Terry's role is 'ideologically comfortable' is an ironic understatement that pinpoints Terry's betrayal of his principles; as much as he hates the police as a site of institutionalised fascism, Terry makes a fortune by playing a sergeant.

Terry is one out of many lip servers in *The Buddha of Suburbia*; yet it is questionable whether his political intentions have been genuine or yet another identity tag in the first place. The novel seizes on this ambiguity throughout; if hybridising one's identity is easy common practice, how confident and consistent are the characters in staying true to their new opinions? The text uncovers various disparities underneath alleged political positions and lifestyles. Terry's convictions, for instance, are based on half-knowledge that makes Karim furious:

> People who were only ever half right about things drove me mad. I hated the flood of opinion, the certainty, the easy talk about Cuba and Russia and the economy, because beneath the hard structure of words was an abyss of ignorance and not-knowing; and, in a sense, of not wanting to know. (*The Buddha* 241)

Karim unveils how insubstantial political stances are in his environment: underneath the 'easy talk' lies 'an abyss' of ignorance and lack of "practical experience" (*The Buddha* 241). In this passage, human opinion is equated with prejudice and preconceived assumptions about the world. What the narrator cynically targets is the

human easiness with which half-truths are sold and discussed as firm beliefs and opinions. In other examples, it is (religious) irrationality under the coat of certainty that drives Karim mad. The radicalness behind Anwar's hunger-strike, for instance, "was making [Karim] tremble" (*The Buddha* 60).

Despite human delusions and hypocrisies, the novel allows for reconciliatory passages that raise human vulnerabilities to the surface. In a scene of sexual tension and near-violence, Karim suddenly realises the humanity in Terry's behaviour:

> I kept on rubbing him, pushing into his crotch, digging my nails into his balls, until I glanced up at his face. However angry I was with him, however much I wanted to humiliate Terry, I suddenly saw such humanity in his eyes, and in the way he tried to smile – such innocence in the way he wanted to understand me, and such possibility of pain, along with the implicit assumption that he wouldn't be harmed – that I pulled away. (*The Buddha* 241)

Karim's epiphany does not contain any comic effects, as there are no hypocrisies and inconsistencies to be judged or uncovered. Instead, Terry's 'humanity' and 'innocence' come into Karim's view. Only moments earlier, Karim has judged upon Terry's political falseness and dubious knowledge; here he portrays a human encounter ('saw … in his eyes') interlaced with embarassement, pain and understanding. This alteration in Karim's perspective allows for an approach to his surrounding characterised by both cynical distance and attempts to apprehend the humanity within the other characters.

Similarly, in the midst of his rage with Anwar's religious fasting (as in the midst of his dismissal of Terry's political dubiousness), Karim contemplates the universality of the human disposition to make one's lives and each other's lives as difficult as possible:

> I couldn't believe the things people did to themselves, how they screwed up their lives and made things go wrong, like Dad having it away with Eva, or Ted's breakdown, and now Uncle Anwar going on this major Gandhi diet. It wasn't as if external circumstances had forced them into these lunacies; it was plain illusion in the head. (*The Buddha* 60)

Human irrationality and self-destruction as pointed out in this passage are triggered by 'plain illusions' in people's heads. What the narrator calls 'lunacy' is human propensity for 'self-sabotage' (Buchanan 164); all characters are haunted by pitfalls they themselves have created, be that divorce or love-affairs, a nervous breakdown or blackmailing one's own family. The all-encompassing nature of Karim's statements is signalled in the text: the generalisation that he makes about human nature has a bearing on the lives of many of the characters he knows, thus transcending race,

gender or ethnicity. Karim's universal premises echo throughout the novel, mirroring how "fucked-up and perplexed" (*The Buddha* 76) people's lives are. Again, this contemplation of the troublesome human condition finds expression in a passage lacking wittiness and carefree humour. The interplay between comic and serious sections in the novel are interconnected; while Karim ruthlessly unmasks human folly with his scorn, he wonders about those very same human 'lunacies' in more sombre statements.

What the above examples show is *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s unequivocal postulate of the universality of human flaws. Karim's ruthlessly candid and comic approach to his own weaknesses and weaknesses of others is illustrative of the universalist and humanist agenda of Kureishi's novel. *The Buddha of Suburbia* tackles the downside of humanity (see Buchanan 163 f) with a touch of Bachtinian laughter that is all-encompassing and unmasking in nature. As every character is portrayed with comic effects and unmasked in his or her inconsistencies, it becomes difficult for the reader to completely sympathize with some characters and entirely dismiss others. Instead, *The Buddha of Suburbia* names and shames the weaknesses of all characters in equal measure.

Racism represents one common thread in human experience that crosses boundaries of race, culture, religion, age or politics. Due to the textual exposure of racial tendencies in all characters, racism and xenophobia gain a universal dimension that goes beyond typically post-colonial attributions. Whatever attitude Kureishi's characters may have towards race and Othering, it is relativised or openly unmasked by the text as "prejudiced and partial" (Oubechou 106). As a consequence, racism ceases to be a deficiency confined to white English characters only; instead, it is disclosed as a human potential lurking in every character in this novel.

At the same time, the characters of *The Buddha of Suburbia* are constantly engaged in hybrid transformations of their identities. However, via comic effects, the novel does not validate the results of their metamorphoses; the narrator pokes fun at the characters' struggle to be unique and distinguished as possible, even if it bars aspects of their personality, results in distorted versions of themselves and leads to a restlessness in finding more alluring identity tags. As much as they are obsessed with self-staging, the characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are ambivalent in their thinking and behaviour; they are Janus-faced and ready to abandon or forget their principles whenever it suits them. Perhaps the greatest commonality of Karim and

the rest of the cast is the motive of human absentmindedness as introduced by Bergson (9): as all characters are entirely confident and free of doubt in the righteousness of what they do, they have little apprehension of their weaknesses and the struggles that keep them in suspense. Karim as a first-person narrator is an exception to this rule: he witnesses and criticizes whatever inconsistencies he encounters, and yet he joins this human circus nevertheless. In a world where every character is worthy of ridicule, a world in which racism reaches universal dimensions and even political standpoints are adopted only to be abandoned, post-colonial parameters are upstaged by universal human inconsistencies according to which, everyone is prone to xenophobia, vanity, hypocrisy and self-obsession.

2.4 Conclusion: Contesting the Post-Colonial and Mocking the Human

The Buddha of Suburbia casts a new light on racism and minority interests as two key issues of the post-colonial discourse. Whereas several critics come to the conclusion that Karim Amir's flamboyant narrative voice functions as a verbal attack against the white racist middle-class and theatre enterprise, *The Buddha of Suburbia* draws a more complex picture. Due to comic impulses and situational comedy, it is not easy for the reader to differentiate between racist perpetrators and victims of racism and to side with either position. Whenever racism occurs in the novel, the use of comic effects diffuses binaries such as victim/perpetrator or sympathetic/objectionable. This strategy is integral for the novel's approach to racism as a human trait that pervades the entire society regardless of its fragmentization through race, class, culture or politics. Incidents in which Karim could have acted as a politically engaged representative of the post-colonial principle of 'oppositionality' are infused with comic effects that turn the first-person narrator into a post-colonial anti-hero. Karim is an individual who plays with neo-colonial stereotypes for the sake of his career advancement and a 'victim' of dog-love in a situation in which the reader is aware of the racist connotations of the scene but nevertheless encouraged to laugh at Karim and his bizarre love affair.

Similarly, the representation of non-white, ethnic characters and the thematization of minority interests constitute major issues in Kureishi's novel. The more Karim is expected to speak for black, ethnic or minority experience, the more the narrator crushes all the presuppositions made in his environment. The novel comically dissects those characters who try to impose upon Karim postulates of

ethnic authenticity and minority solidarity. Aat the same time, non-white characters such as Anwar appear mere caricatures at first, but are then portrayed in a reconciliatory fashion that discloses their humanness and vulnerability. Whereas some critics hail the novel for expanding the representation of minority experience by "offering 'new' black subjectivities" (Ranasinha 234), I come to the conclusion that these black or ethnic subjectivities are portrayed with the same human weaknesses and inconsistencies as the white characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The boundaries between black and white are blurred; instead, *The Buddha of Suburbia* explores the negative abysses of human experience beyond racial, cultural or social demarcations.

Comic elements in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are more than a narrative strategy of literary emancipation from 'post-colonial' readings of a character or a scene. They are also a technique that allows the novel to tackle the shadowy side of humanity. The novel's universalist stance and focus on human nature is also mirrored in its first-person narrator Karim who observes and comments on human corruption and moral decay. Karim may be an unrealiable activist, but he is a fair observer: he holds no preferences regarding ethnicity, gender, class or age. Instead, he cynically (and at times seriously) portrays a problematic and troublesome human condition. Despite the novel's ironical distance to human vice, more sombre passages offer reflexions on the commonalities that all characters share. Comic effects in *The Buddha of Suburbia* are an effective textual tool to tirelessly point to the vicious potential in all characters. At the same time, the comic tone is complemented by an all-encompassing understanding view of the human troubles at large.

3. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Published in the year 2000, *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith's debut novel, became an instant bestseller. While the young and talented author of English-Jamaican background was celebrated as a figurehead of a new multicultural generation of writers in Britain, the novel achieved stupendous success as an alleged image of London's euphoric multiculturalism[59]

[59] Throughout my analysis, I will utilise Dave Gunning's definition of multiculturalism and his distinction between 'multicultural' and 'multiculturalism': "The increasing racial diversity of Britain since the Second World War is often captured in the idea of 'the multicultural', a term that gestures towards difference without needing to define how it may be managed; 'multiculturalism', however, speaks immediately to the problem of management, asking exactly how the difference of peoples might be philosophically, ethically, and politically addressed. The multicultural can be conceived of as the totality of transactions and interchanges that take place within a society in which traces of more than one distinct cultural tradition can be discerned. Multiculturalism, on the other hand, refers to political and cultural philosophies and praxes that aim to explain, codify, and legislate over these

at the close of the second millennium. Cultural variety and fusion become palpable in Smith's portrayal of three London families, whose histories and family trees stretch across three different continents and encompass even more cultures and religions. The Iqbals, a Bangladeshi Muslim family, descend from a Hindu soldier named Mangal Pande, a 19th-century mutineer against the colonial Empire in India. The English and Jamaican Joneses stem from a colonial liaison between the English Captain Charlie Durham and his young Jamaican lover Ambrosia Bowden. The Chalfens consider themselves a typical white middle-class English family, while they are in fact Jewish and Christian descendants of German and Polish immigrants to Britain. The novel couples three family lines with historical connections in the past, complex relationships in the present and an unborn child arising in and being presumably raised by all three families. The Iqbals and Joneses are connected via cross-cultural friendships between the white Englishman Archie Jones and his Bangladeshi war comrade Samad Iqbal and their wives and children respectively. The Chalfens become involved as an alleged model English family to support the offspring of the Jones and the Iqbal clan in their schooling. What adds even more to the multicultural mosaic of the novel: virtually all characters commit themselves to various and at times antagonising traditions, mindsets and ideologies such as traditional Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islamic terrorism, animal rights activism, liberalism, multiculturalism, neo-colonialism, and scientific progress at any cost. The novel culminates in the millennial exhibition of a controversial and forward-looking undertaking called the FutureMouse©, a genetic engineering project that attracts outrage and revolt among almost all the groups mentioned above.

Certainly the comic tone of the novel has been received by critics and readers alike as one of *the* dominating features of *White Teeth*. While the public has focused on the novel's entertaining potential ("Do believe the hype, buy into it, curl up with it, savour every sentence, then turn around and reread"[60]), critics have divided into two opposing camps alternating "between enthusiastic appraisal and outright dismissal" (Tancke n. pag.); the novel's cheerful tone has been either celebrated as a reflection of an equally celebrated vision of multicultural Britain, or it has been

relations" (Gunning 108). In this sense, multiculturalism is an active agenda in a society that acknowledges its cultural plurality, promotes mutual respect and acceptance, facilitates multicultural life and opposes discriminatory nationalist movements; the term 'multicultural' simply denotes the compilation of cultures in a society without the notion of management or activism.

[60] *The Times*, on the back of the cover of *White Teeth*'s edition at hand.

criticised as an altogether inadequate strategy for apprehending the conflicts of multicultural life in Britain. Tew laments the polar paths the academic reception of *White Teeth* has taken, thus falling victim to short-lived criticisms reflecting a certain *zeitgeist* while innovative and unbiased perspectives are curbed. Instead of a broad and open-minded approach to what *White Teeth* has to offer, the majority of critics have attempted to "situate and read this text because of their particular agendas" (Tew 132). Tancke also criticizes this development of the novel's reception and suggests that critics should not celebrate nor condemn *White Teeth*, but uncover its textual strategies in order to come to constructive conclusions (Tancke n. pag.). As Tancke, Tew also pleads for "a more nuanced, better informed, less singularly ideological reading for a credible understanding of Smith's subtleties and her aesthetic ambitions" (126). Both critics favour an approach that goes to the core of *White Teeth*'s textual manoeuvres and explores what the text actually *does*, instead of imposing post-colonial (or any other) criteria upon the novel and discussing whether it has adequately appropriated them. This premise is vital for my approach to *White Teeth.* Accordingly, I am not interested in the (political) appropriateness of the novel's comic tone or how suitable it may or may not be for the satisfactory realisation of a certain agenda or *zeitgeist*. Instead, my focus lies on three questions: how do comic effects in *White Teeth* contribute to the novel's treatment of post-colonial concepts? How do they assist in shedding a new light on post-colonial perspectives from a humanist point of view? How do they help to explore aspects of human nature buried under concepts such as culture, religion or political affiliation?

3.1 Revisiting 'Happy Multicultural Land' From a Humanist Perspective

Initially, *White Teeth* was considered a literary cornerstone for a new multicultural self-awareness and self-aggrandisement, capturing the "cheerfully positive vision of multicultural Britain in the early Blair years" (Tancke n. pag.). The early reception of the novel spotlighted the fact that the multicultural society in Britain has finally resulted in a burgeoning multicultural literary genre – with the cheerful novel *White Teeth* as one of its major literary ambassadors. Maya Jaggi, for instance, states that *White Teeth* echoes London's "fertile … polyphony" ("In a Strange Land" n. pag.); for Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, every single location in the text – be that the children's school or the pub where some of the characters regularly meet – is a piece of this new London conceived as a multicultural collage (183);

Dominic Head for his part combines the novel's complex grid of stories and characters with its cultural variety as the literary representation of multiculturalism in Britain (106). All these examples dovetail with what McLeod has poignantly summed up under the term of Britain's late 90s' 'millennial optimism',

> a cheerful and forward-looking view of the fertile possibilities of London's multicultural present which could be effectively pitted against the continuing problems of racism and illiberal nationalism which troubled London's social relations. In such ways might culture, and especially literature, offer transformative resources to those of us who demand an end to the divisiveness and prejudices which often found their origins in the attitudes of Empire. ("Revisiting Postcolonial London" 39)

In other words, multiculturalism has been set up as a bulwark against racism and right-wing nationalism in British society. As for the role of literature in multiculturalist thinking, it has been considered a vital medium in promoting the idea of cultural plurality and reflecting cultural fusions that have been operating in Britain for decades. At the same time, multicultural fiction has represented a literary answer and opposition to racist forces and extremist mindsets.[61] While the celebration of 'millennial optimism' has turned literary works into beacons of multicultural jubilation, the authors have been considered the celebrities of this movement. Zadie Smith, for instance, has gained the status of a pioneer of this new generation of culturally and racially mixed writers who embody the spirit of 'millennial optimism'. Smith's status as an author has risen to what Tew refers to as an 'urban myth' as she is said to represent a

> symbol of multicultural hope and positivity. Through her image the idea (or ideal) of a reborn nation could be articulated, at least implicitly. She combines variously the new (youth and hybrid origins, the latter testament to the positive effects of migration), the ongoing radicality of gender (a young woman in the public domain) with the traditional (bookishness, Cambridge, and an explicitly traditional literariness). Add immense financial rewards to her youthful literary success and her meteoric rise begins to acquire the status of an urban myth. (Tew 21)

When confronted with her new, publicly enforced image, Smith denies being the poster child of Britain's multiculturalism dismissing the idea that Britain's multicultural society has overcome discrimination and racism and achieved the state of mutual acceptance and celebration of cultural diversity. According to Smith, a novel such as *White Teeth* leads to a feeling of collective self-exaltation that ignores the continuation

[61] Ahokas (2004); Mirze (2008).

of xenophobia and violence in Britain ("Cultural Forces" n. pag.).[62] For Gunning, *White Teeth* in fact calls into question "the complacency and triumphalism that finds the end of racial history in the achievements of multiculturalism" (149). As racial differences and racist behaviour are still palpable in the novel, they silence the multicultural spirit of equality and mutual tolerance. In the same manner, Jakubiak states that Britain's self-congratulation is out of place as its multicultural chirpiness is in fact only a fake "simulation of a successful society" (212). Gradually, scholars have come to understand the novel's critique of Britain's multiculturalist image; it thus makes sense to argue that it has become unfashionable to categorise *White Teeth* as a novel which promotes multiculturalism. My closer look at the novel's comic manoeuvres will confirm its interrogation of parameters of multiculturalism, particularly in the exploration of some of its characters that have actively committed themselves to this cause.

Naturally, the novel's spotlight on cultural diversity and critique of multiculturalism has soon brought post-colonial voices into the arena. With the post-colonial focus on the shadowy side of multiculturalism in *White Teeth*, critics have established the idea that, as such, *White Teeth* belongs to *post-colonial* fiction as a novel that pinpoints limits and disadvantages of multiculturalism in Britain. Meinig argues that in *White Teeth*, the idea(l) of "Happy Multicultural Land" (*WT* 465) collides with ideas of the present-day post-colonial discourse as the post-colonial condition cannot be described in terms of playful multicultural folklore. Rather, it is a sphere where different cultures constantly collide and negotiate in their attempts to position themselves (Meinig 249). Squires claims that the novel's comic dismissal of multiculturalist naivety can be compared to Salman Rushdie's work and his critique of Britain as an entirely carefree multicultural society: "[A]ttitudes of grief, melancholy and despair are as prevalent in [Smith's] narrative as those of optimism, joy, and reconciliation" (Squires 45). Thompson also observes that the novel's anti-multiculturalist agenda places *White Teeth* in the vicinity of the contemporary post-colonial discourse (again, with Rushdie as one of *the* advocates against euphoria of multiculturalism):

> By problematising the notion of 'multiculturalism', as Smith undoubtedly does, she is in accordance with many postcolonial critics and theorists who have contested the term and who believe it may obscure a different reality - one with more sinister connotations. According to Salman Rushdie 'multiculturalism' is a

[62] Smith refers to the case of Steven Lawrence, a young black, who was killed by five white adolescents in 1993. Slow and ineffective investigation and prosecution of the crime raised the suspicion of corrupt public authorities and institutionalised racism ("Stephen Lawrence: Chronology of Events" n.. pag.).

> fake panacea, a new 'catchword', and 'the latest token gesture towards Britain's Blacks.' He says, the term 'ought to be exposed, like <integration> and <racial harmony>, for the sham it is' [Rushdie 1991, qtd. in Thompson]. (Thompson 123)

Under this premise, *White Teeth* seems to fulfil Ball's criterion of post-colonial 'oppositionality' (Ball 2). From the post-colonial perspective, the novel dismisses multiculturalism as an idealised concept that entirely eclipses the continuing presence of racism. If we think of *White Teeth* as a critique of multiculturalism merely for the sake of an anti-racist agenda, the novel certainly appears a post-colonial piece of fiction. However, this reading of *White Teeth* appears very simplistic: multiculturalism is not simply an alibi campaign against racism. In my analysis, I will read it as yet another doctrine (out of many more doctrines and ideologies in the novel) that colossally fails at giving orientation or instruction on how to manage (cultural) relationships between people and resolve multicultural issues in general. The campaign of multiculturalism is doomed to fail not only because of the perpetuation of racist thinking, but because both sides, the white English mainstream and the minority groups are represented by people with flaws, interests and hypocrisies betraying the multiculturalist agenda or using it for their own purposes. Put more simply, if there are scapegoats for the failure of multiculturalism, it would be all individuals involved in this issue. The comic effects in the novel tease out the human factor behind the celebration of diversity; as we may expect with the novel's alternating scorn and sympathy, it does not draw clear ethnic lines between the profiteers and the victims of multiculturalism. As *White Teeth* fleshes out the human intentions and motives lurking underneath the cloak of multiculturalism, the parallels between the parties involved become striking.

Without fail, the vision of a jolly multicultural society comes under heavy comic fire in *White Teeth*. All along, the omniscient narrator sets comic hallmarks that add up to a bizarre picture of 'Happy Multicultural Land', a space that is constantly debunked for being the exact opposite of what it presumably represents. In a passage where the comic potential is designed mostly via cynical opposites, the narrator lays bare the tenets of this multicultural land of dreams:

> [W]e often imagine that immigrants are constantly on the move, footlose, able to change course at any moment, able to employ their legendary resourcefulness at every turn. We have been told of the resourcefulness of Mr Schmutters, or the footloosity of Mr Banajii, who sail into Ellis Island or Dover or Calais and step into foreign lands as *blank people*, free of any kind of baggage, happy and willing to leave their difference at the docks and take their chances in this new place, merging with the oneness of this greenandpleasantlibertarianlandofthe-

> free. Whatever road presents itself, they will take, and if it happens to lead to a dead end, well then, Mr Schmutters and Mr Banajii will merrily set upon another, weaving their way through Happy Multicultural Land. Well, good for them. But Magid and Millat [the two Iqbal sons] couldn't manage it. (*WT* 465, emphasis in the original)

Passages like this stand out in their more sombre and aggressive tone that unambiguously comments on the target of its scorn. The comparison of immigrant destinies with the image of a bizarre and fantastic land of multicultural complacency appears cynical. Yet, the narrator points out that this is the conventional image of immigration that 'we have been told'. With the collective pronoun 'we', this passage appears a credo of multiculturalism consisting of platitudes such as the 'greenandpleasantlibertarianlandofthefree'. The casualness of the tone, the taken-for-grantedness of easy immigrant fortune once they have passed the proverbial Ellis Island, Dover or Calais further underpins this impression. The comic incongruity of this multiculturalist confession[63] lies in the irreconcilable tension between the image of what seems a bouncy theme park of multiculturalism inhabited by 'Mr Schmutters' and 'Mr Banajii' known for their 'legendary' immigrant skills, *and* the immigrant experience of Magid and Millat Iqbal, of whom we learn in the context that they cannot inscribe themselves on the canvas of this multicultural society without "only … more and more eloquently express[ing] their past" (*WT* 466). The multicultural society conceived by the narrator in this passage is populated by adroit, carefree and rather emblematic immigrant clichés as opposed to immigrants such as Millat and Magid, burdened by their entire historical luggage that "they cannot escape … any more than you yourself can lose your shadow" (*WT* 466). The passage above closes with a cynical narratorial comment ('Well, good for them') as a revelation that the idealised immigrant fate of Mr Schmutters and Mr Banajii would never withstand the experience of Magid and Millat. The feasibility of 'Happy Multicultural Land' is finally reduced to absurdity. As Thompson argues, this multicultural world is far from a place one can call home as it simply overlooks the "intergenerational tensions and cultural conflicts within and between its protagonists" (Thompson 123).

In the examples to follow, the narrative voice scrutinizes sites of cultural diversity and 'confessing' multiculturalists: what comes to light are human weaknesses,

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[63] My invocations of multiculturalist creed and religion are deliberate; as will become apparent, multiculturalism resembles any other '-ism' in *White Teeth*: it has its mindset and practice, rituals and its festivals, leaflets and expressions.

inconsistencies, insecurities and interests that make it difficult for the reader to side with either party. Glenard Oak Comprehensive School is one of the novel's central loci of cultural diversity and multiculturalist thinking. One closer look at the parent-teacher conference illustrates the disparity between the doctrine of multiculturalism and the many ways it fails to factor in hidden human agendas comically exposed in the text. Representing his two twin boys at the session, Samad Iqbal, a Bangladeshi Muslim, constantly bombards the suggestions made by the school council with his own questions and proposals. Katie Miniver, a white divorcee and the chairwoman of the session, is enervated by Samad's annoying comments:

> She wanted to check that it was not her imagination, that she was not being unfair or undemocratic, or worse still *racist* (but she had read *Colour Blind*, a seminal leaflet from the Rainbow Coalition, she had scored well on the self-test), racist in ways that were so deeply ingrained and socially determining that they escaped her attention. (*WT* 126, emphasis in the original)

Certainly, Samad Iqbal is rather irritant in this scene; yet the narrator delivers a insight into the inner response of Katie Miniver who seems to be ticking off her irritation with Samad against a list of unwanted features (unfair, undemocratic, or even – with a narrative emphasis – 'still *racist*'). The chairwoman quickly composes herself at the recollection that she has taken a test attesting her non-racist attitude. The tension between her political correctness and genuine anger is almost palpable; Katie Miniver is torn by the multicultural dilemma of treating Samad as a member of another culture (in which case she would have to swallow her huff to show her tolerance of minorities) or simply as a human provocateur (in which case she would never question her irritation as racist). The chairwoman's response is emblematic for the duplicity towards minority characters exacerbated by multiculturalist imperatives. While her instant human response to Samad's unnerving behaviour is anger, Katie Miniver censors her natural impulses on the premise that Samad belongs to a minority and is thus not to be treated as a disagreeable troublemaker but as a non-white immigrant whose conduct and requirements should by all means be met with multiculturalist tolerance. Katie's inner conflict is exposed to the narrator's comic disruption, but so is the multiculturalist cause to which she has subscribed. Multiculturalism prevents Katie from meeting and dealing with minority characters on a human, personal level. Instead, it engages her in acts of forced and faked tolerance and the concern of how to keep her (anti-racist) countenance in intercultural interactions. Katie's attempt to reassure herself with her anti-racist score is equally ridiculed: it seems rather paradoxical that an organization called 'Rainbow

Coalition'[64] teaches how to be 'colourblind' and it appears even more absurd to assume that one's own racist attitude can be tested, measured by a score and treated as indicative of one's own tolerance. The narrator challenges throughout Katie Miniver's entire process of thought by concluding with a comment that is free of comic potential ('racist in ways … attention'). This closure of the passage makes clear that self-evaluation of racist attitudes is as preposterous as the idea that one could methodically capture and gradate a phenomenon "so deeply ingrained and socially determining that [it] escape[s] [one's] attention" (*WT* 126). I would go as far as to argue that this remark is indicative of the true nature of racism: it is a deep and latent human potential that no (multiculturalist) agenda can eradicate and no test can measure.

A closer look at the school's philosophy of cultural diversity insinuates that the staff fosters cultural tolerance with leaflets, rituals and platitudes. The school's commitment to religious diversity has reached almost grotesque dimensions: when Samad vents his anger at the school's 'pagan' Harvest Festival, Mrs Owens, the headmistress of the school, defends this cultural practice (and the inclusion of the Harvest Festival) as follows:

> 'Mr Iqbal, we have been through the matter of religious festivals quite thoroughly in the autumn review. As I am sure you are aware, the school already recognizes a great variety of religious and secular events: amongst them, Christmas, Ramadan, Chinese New Year, Diwali, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, the birthday of Haile Selassie, and the death of Martin Luther King. The Harvest Festival is part of the school's ongoing commitment to religious diversity, Mr Iqbal.' (*WT* 129)

Ideally, such an all-encompassing approach to cultural, political and religious commemorations aims at a level of inclusion and diversification upon which minor affected groups have little reason to feel excluded. However, this excessive medley of school calendar festivities ironically causes fierce resistance on the part of Samad Iqbal, who in a nitpicking fashion attacks the unjust ratio between Christian and Muslim festivities and asks for the removal of the Harvest Festival. At this stage, the well-meant intentions of cultural diversification are farcically subverted into mutual polemics: the headmistress sardonically objects that it is not in her authority to abolish Christian holidays, while Samad sarcastically replies that "[t]his Harvest Festival is *not* a

[64] Rainbow Coalition is a pro-active organization now known as the Rainbow PUSH Coalition. One of their major goals is the improvement of the situation of black communities in the US in terms of economy, social status, education, etc. ("Brief History"). One of the founders was Martin Luther King, jr. - a fact that explains both the promotion of the leaflet in Glenard Oak and the school's celebration of Martin Luther King Day.

Christian festival. Where in the bible does it say, *Thou shalt take a box of frozen fishfingers to an aged crone who lives in Wembley*?" (*WT* 130, emphasis in the original) Procter correctly observes that this school scene does not favour one party over the other; consequently, the reader is not given any guidance towards sympathy but invited to laugh at Samad's pedantry and the headmistresses' equally obstinate position. Samad's irritant assertiveness is met with the school council's polite suppression of her inner irritation. In a sense, both parties expose each *other* in the ridiculousness of their behaviour. In passages like this, as Procter suggests, the binaries between the 'notoriously bad' white subject and the 'good' black subject are eliminated ("New Ethnicities" 115).

If one puts this school debate in a broader context, *White Teeth*'s 'Happy Multicultural Land' is not only a farce, but rendered impossible. The multicultural(-ist) Glenard Oak has its roots deep down in colonial enterprise: its founder Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard starts a cross-cultural experiment for profit by bringing Jamaican tobacco workers to England to curb the religious devotion of the English and the work ethics of the Jamaicans respectively (*WT* 305). On the other side of the hot-headed multiculturalist debate is Samad, an alleged devotee of Islam who, as it turns out, is ready to forsake his religious determination when he meets the seductive teacher Poppy Burt-Jones only minutes after the school meeting (Procter, "New Ethnicities" 115). As it happens, Samad has a cross-cultural 'experiment' of his own: in the dead of night, he sends one of his 8-year-old twins overseas to Bangladesh to become a 'proper' Muslim (*WT* 216 f). Both men, Samad and Sir Edmund, play with destinies of others, both experiments colossally fail. Sir Edmund's Jamaican workers are left at their own devices, many suffer hunger and crime and what is worst, "they were English now, more English than the English by virtue of their disappointments" (*WT* 307). Ironically enough (and to Samad's horror), Bangladesh turns Magid Iqbal into "a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer" (*WT* 407). One cannot help but acknowledge that the delineations between a colonial entrepreneur and his immigrant counterpart are not only blurred: they are turned into parallels. Tew correctly observes that, much like Sir Edmund Glenard, Samad is "characterised by histrionic knowingness, his rigid insistences, and his egotistical refusal to account for others … . The decisions [Samad] takes and the situation in which he finds subsequently himself often *appear* foolish, and *are* misguided" (Tew 60, emphasis in the original).

Other sites of multicultural practice point to a similar diagnosis: both members of the white English mainstream *and* the minority communities are ready to use culture for their own purposes and exploit the idea of cultural diversity for profit. Completing Glenard Oak School as a site where multiculturalism is part of the curriculum, Samad's workplace, an 'Indian' restaurant named Palace represents another locality where the amenity of cultural diversity is enjoyed in form of exotic cuisine. The narrator, however, reveals the true nature of this 'Eastern' restaurant as a business idea that is fuelled with capitalist desire for profit and multicultural hunger for exoticism. Ardashir, Samad's remote cousin, employs luckless relatives such as Samad, whom he gives a waiter job at the Palace (*WT* 55). Ardashir and his restaurant are introduced by the narrative voice as follows:

> One had to admire Ardashir's business sense. He had taken the simple idea of an Indian restaurant (small room, pink tablecloth, loud music, atrocious wallpaper, meals that do not exist in India, sauce carousel) and just made it bigger. He hadn't improved anything; everything was the same old crap, but it was all bigger in a bigger building in the biggest tourist trap in London, Leicester Square. You had to admire it and admire the man, who sat now like a benign locust, his slender insectile body swamped in a black leather chair, leaning over the desk, all smiles, a parasite disguised as a philanthropist. (*WT* 59)

This passage combines humorous potential with notable aggressiveness. The target of the narrator's scorn can be labeled as 'multiculturalist consumerism'; in this case, the sale and consumption of what is considered 'authentic' food of a particular culture. The narrator heavily attacks the common multicultural image of an Indian restaurant in London, or rather, its shabby and tasteless stereotype: Ardashir has only magnified what the narrator vulgarly refers to as 'the same old crap'. The entire episode has an irritating cynical twitch: while the narrative gaze wanders from the wretchedness of the location towards the image of Ardashir as a sly entrepreneur, the reader is invited to admire both the idea and the man behind the idea. Ardashir himself is portrayed as a grotesque animal contrast between a human and a locust. In a distorting fashion, the image evokes the parasitical nature of a locust swarm feeding on its prey until it is entirely bleak and lifeless; Ardashir, then, is the greedy human incarnation of this parasite's merciless greediness. The cynicism emanated in the passage culminates in a subverted masquerade as the reader is given full insight into Ardashir's greedy mind and behaviour only to find out that it is hidden behind the mask of a 'philanthropist': after all, Ardashir gives his customers what they need and provides jobs for his relatives. Ardashir's alleged human kindness unequivocally resembles the lifework of another

entrepreneur, the colonial businessman and founder of Glenard Oak, Sir Edmund Glenard, whom the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) remembers as "an educational philanthropist" (*WT* 304). However, the narrator reveals the euphemistic character of that label by stating that Glenard can be considered a philanthropist as much as the word 'detention' is blanched over by 'post-class aberration consideration period' (*WT* 304). Both characters, Glenard and Ardashir, use culture as an economic factor. For Glenard, it is mutual fertilization of Jamaican and English culture for the sake of a virtually religious dedication to work ethics, whereas Ardashir's capitalist pragmatism exploits the exoticism of culture-as-a-consumer-good deeply rooted in the celebration of cultural diversity. Ardashir's idea seems to feed a hunger for exotic goods and cuisine in London's multicultural environment. The reader is introduced to the Palace's customers as excited consumers of an exotic cuisine, eager to use a restaurant visit as an expansion of their cultural horizon:

> [T]hey … inquired after the geography of the food - its Eastern origin, its history – all of which would be happily fabricated by the younger waiters (whose furthest expedition East was the one they made daily, back home to Whitechapel, Smithfield's, the Isle of Dogs) or rendered faithfully and proudly by the elders in black biro on the back of a pink napkin. (*WT* 203)

The comic tone of this passage is generated by the revelation that the consumers' interest for exotic authenticity for the Asian 'East' is satisfied by waiters who *look* Asian and *come* from the East, namely the Eastern suburbs of London. In Ardashir's Palace, culture is appreciated for its monetary convenience; its authenticity and exoticism are 'happily fabricated' to supply customer interests that are short-lived and superficial. The narrator suggests that the only exchange of cultural information is the translation and proper pronunciation of a fictitious Indian dish delivered on the back of a napkin. This, indeed, is a poor and cynical example of cross-cultural "transactions and interchanges that take place within a [multicultural] society" (Gunning 108). In this passage, intercultural communication is reduced to culinary and fictitious information delivered to "theatre crowds" (*WT* 203). However, most customers frequenting the Palace are impatient and ignorant guests, who, from Samad's perspective, are offshoots reflecting the multicultural metropolis of London,

> [a] place where there exists neither patience nor pity, where the people want what they want now, right now (*We've been waiting twenty minutes for the vegetables*), expecting their lovers, their children, their friends and even their gods to arrive at little cost and in little time, just as table ten expect their *tandoori* prawns … . These people who would exchange all faith for sex and all sex for power, who would exchange fear of God for self-pride, knowledge for

> irony, a covered respectful head for a long, strident shock of orange hair … . (*WT* 207, emphasis in the original)

Samad draws parallels between the interior of the restaurant and the outside world; between the way his guests order their food and their more general mentality. A guest's impatience quoted in the bracketed parenthesis is a symptom of a far more general, social impatience; from Samad's perspective, the customers' expectation of their cheap and fast tandoori prawns mirrors a whole society's time and money-saving mentality. Samad's comparison of the mentality of a culture with deliverance and consumption of food practised in this culture bears comic potential; at the same time, it appears a bitter accusation of a hapless waiter disappointed by 'Happy Multicultural Land'. Whatever sympathy the reader holds for Samad's bitter scorn, it is soon turned on its head as Samad is caught in the hypocritical act of judging the 'crimes' he has committed himself, namely adultery and playing god. The plot dramatizes Samad's hypocrisy by colliding Samad's two sins right then and there: it is the night when Samad will play with his sons' destinies and send one of them to Bangladesh to become a Muslim exemplar that Samad has never been, thus creating a "monstrous schism in his family as a result, alienating his wife until the return of [his son] Magid, [and] dividing his sons in perpetuity" (Tew 64). What is more: Samad's second misdemeanour happens to be present at the scene in the shape of Poppy Burt-Jones, Samad's extramarital affair, waiting to be waited on as he approaches her table in his contemplation of the society's flaws. Samad's fatal decision to send Magid to Bangladesh is intertwined with his break-up with Poppy (*WT* 201); both decisions are supposed to deliver Samad from the weight of having failed Allah as soon as he caught sight of Poppy Burt-Jones for the first time (*WT* 140). Again, this passage does not allow for ultimate sympathy or judgement: Samad curses the flippant and superficial world of multicultural London while ignoring the fact that, due to his decisions, he massively contributes to precisely this condition in which, in Samad's own words, "we tear each other apart" (*WT* 201).

These examples are illustrative of *White Teeth*'s new angle on Britain's multicultural society backed up by narrative tactics. The depictions of 'Happy Multicultural Land' ooze comic effects and narrative scorn; and yet, it is above all the novel's double-edged humour that makes unequivocal conclusions impossible. Multicultural Britain is inhabited by alleged philanthropists and capitalist exploiters on both sides; it is a place where do-gooders draw their goodwill and tolerance from leaflets and tests and characters that feel self-righteous about their religion and cultural

distinctiveness and abandon it very soon. It is also an arena of striking parallels between colonial masters and their immigrant counterparts, an ironic fact that makes easy judgements and distinctions between white English characters and minority characters difficult. More than merely rejecting multiculturalism as a cheerful alibi campaign, the novel carves out the human factor lurking underneath boastful declarations and doctrines. Stepping away from the post-colonial perspective and its emphasis on white racism as the key trait covered by the multiculturalist agenda, the novel uncovers many more human interests and anxieties shared by both sides, thus making it impossible to point a finger at scapegoats on only one side.

3.2 Racism: A Post-Colonial Catchword or a Basic Human Trait?

'*If you ask me*,' said one disgruntled O A P to another, '*they should all go back to their own...*' But this, the oldest sentence in the world, found itself stifled by the ringings of bells and stamping of feet, until it retreated under the seats with the chewing gum.

- *White Teeth*[65]

On a bus full of elderly people, Irie Jones and Millat and Magid Iqbal quarrel recklessly over what food gifts they should bring to Mr Hamilton, a war veteran and beneficiary of the children's Harvest Festival charity. As they hop off, they are escorted by '*they should all go back to their own...*', a xenophobic slogan and, as the narrative voice in the epigraph suggests, 'the oldest sentence in the world'. In *White Teeth*, this sentence is uttered many times, on many different occasions and in various forms; as insinuated in the epigraph, it has *universal* value. If we unravel what 'the oldest sentence in the world' implies, we will discover its transcultural impact and its continuity through space and time. In other words, '*they should all go back to their own...*' is part of a general human mantra, an expression of hostility and Othering that dominates human affairs and thinking beyond cultural borders.

It is precisely under this premise that I analyse comic instances of racism, hostility and discrimination of others in Zadie Smith's novel. I will read racism and exclusivist thinking as a human potential, a trait that subliminally lurks in all characters of the novel regardless of the system of beliefs to which they have committed themselves and regardless of their culture, class, age or gender. The novel's comic impetus contributes immensely to the idea of racism and Othering as a shared human flaw: it exposes latent racist undertones and pinpoints racial anxiety as an omnipresent and a cross-cultural

[65] *WT* 163, emphasis in the original.

factor in the multicultural London at the close of the second millennium. Consequently, my interpretation abandons post-colonial delineations between racist perpetrators and victims of racism. Instead, I focus on racism and xenophobic hostility as human universal phenomena displayed by virtually all characters in the novel. Easy finger-pointing at 'white' racism is thus abolished; in uncovering racist human subtleties in *all* of its characters, *White Teeth* disqualifies for the label of a post-colonial novel with the post-colonial agenda of 'oppositionality' (Ball 2) against a predominantly white racism.

Many critics agree upon the idea that racism continues to exist in contemporary Britain.[66] However, at the bottom of their conclusions lies the notion that white characters most notably perpetuate racism. Tracey Walters, for instance, observes that racial stereotypes permeate every segment of the society portrayed in the novel. She continues with a detailed enumeration of these racial stereotypes by including the colonial war veteran Mr Hamilton, the disciple of cultural diversity Poppy Burt-Jones, and the white liberal Chalfen family ("Still Mammies" 127). One look at her list suggests that 'racial stereotypes' are in fact *white* racial stereotypes: even Samad's son Magid (who could diversify this conglomeration by the fact that he has Bangladeshi parents) is described as "the South Asian anglophile who is more 'English than the English'" ("Still Mammies" 127). Similarly, Squires highlights Mr Hamilton's "incipient racism" and the Chalfen family's liability to exoticism of 'brown strangers' and the stimulating effects this exoticism might have (38). Both critics focus on forms of 'white' racism, be that Mr Hamilton's neo-colonial fantasies of killing black soldiers in Congo or the Chalfen's well-meant but latent paternalism towards other cultures.

Several other critics propose the idea that it is exactly this omnipresence of white racist hostility that in fact provokes radical solutions such as Islamic fundamentalism. Nicola Allen for instance, states that characters marginalised by 'white' prejudice and discrimination lean towards fundamentalist militancy (N. Allen 87; also Gunning 132). Apart from that, 'white' racism seems to be responsible for many other things: "It is racism that propels Millat to protest against *The Satanic Verses* (pp. 233-4), racism that persuades Mo, the butcher who saves Archie's life, to join KEVIN (pp. 472-3), and racism that precipitates the Iqbal family's move from the east end to Willesden" (Squires 39). These critical statements amount to two postulates: racism and xenophobia are predominantly white phenomena; the carriers of racial prejudice are

[66] Gunning (2011); Jakubiak (2008); Rushdie in Thompson (2005).

mostly white and English and, white racism is responsible for the majority of negative and radical repercussions in the marginalised communities. Naturally, by the virtue of the novel's focus on racial issues, Squires concludes that *White Teeth* can be considered post-colonial fiction (43). Laura Moss deviates from this diagnosis only to a little extent: she suggests that *White Teeth* poses racism as a "quotidian" phenomenon without placing a particular emphasis on it (Moss 15). According to Moss, this is one possible agenda of what she refers to as 'post-post-colonial' fiction, namely a balanced dedication to a variety of everyday circumstances of multicultural Britain (15). 'Post-post-colonial' or not, Moss also perceives racism as a problem immanent to only those in Britain who fear the replacement of white Englishness by the changes of a new, more hybridised Britain (14). Whether it is liberal, multiculturalist, neo-colonial or 'quotidian': from the post-colonial perspective, racism in Britain is *white*. In my analysis of racism in *White Teeth*, I will interrogate this axiom by examining instances of prejudice, discrimination and racist thinking apparent in all families and communities irrespective of their ethnic, religious or racial background. I lay my focus on the Bagladeshi Iqbals and Jamaican Bowdens and Joneses; white characters will serve as counterparts to complete my idea of racism as a universal trait of human condition.

First and foremost, the term 'racism' needs clarification. As distinct from racial purity[67], racism implies a mindset and behaviour that "upholds the discrimination against certain people on the grounds of perceived racial difference and claims these constructions of racial identity are true or natural" (McLeod, *Beginning* 110 f). The focus here lies on intolerance and the insistence that groups that are perceived as 'other' are excluded as inferior to one's own group. In extreme cases, this exclusion morphs into racist assaults. McLeod states that the colour of skin is one of the most prominent markers of racial distinction; however, as racial differences are essentially invented political concepts, markers for racial exclusion can be rather arbitrary (*Beginning* 110). On this account, I will treat racism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance as equally harmful concepts, as in some instances hostility is directed against skin colour, in others, against cultural ethnicity or immigration in general.

[67] For the purpose of this analysis, racial purity stands for the concept of an entirely homogenous race hermetically separated from other races. Racial purity is nurtured by myths, markers that make a race distinctive and apply to all of its members and the idea that one's own race is idealised. Concepts of racial purity in *White Teeth* can base upon the colour of one's skin or membership to the Indo-Aryan race as the ancestors of Western culture (*WT* 236). Concepts of national purity are Englishness or Bengaliness. The notion of (racial) purity will be discussed in length in the corresponding section below.

Certainly, Enoch Powell's notorious "Rivers of Blood" speech (1968)[68], a vehement attack on immigration to Britain, has substantiated the suspicion of Britain's white racism directed against immigrants. References to Powell echo throughout the novel: after moving to Willesden, Alsana Iqbal looks back onto the racial turmoil in her old Whitechapel neighbourhood, "where that madman E-knock someoneoranother gave a speech that forced them into the basement while kids broke the windows with their steel-capped boots. Rivers of blood silly-billy nonsense" (*WT* 62 f). The passage emanates Alsana's snort of dismissal ('silly-billy nonsense') at Powell's public tirade against foreigners; it appears an unequivocal critique against xenophobia of any kind. However, as she strolls through her new multicultural neighbourhood, Alsana expresses her scepticism with strikingly similar wording:

> *Mali's Kebabs*, *Mr Cheungs*, *Raj's*, *Malkovich Bakeries* – she read the new, unfamiliar signs as she passed. She was shrewd. She saw what this was. 'Liberal? Hosh-kosh nonsense!' No one was more liberal than anyone else anywhere anyway. It was only that here, in Willesden, there was just not enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing and send it running to the cellars while windows were smashed. (*WT* 63, emphasis in the original)

In an instant, parallels between the two neighbourhoods become apparent: both are entitled as 'nonsense' and both evoke images of smashed windows and escapes to the cellar. Alsana cynically observes that liberal neighbourhoods lack racist turmoil because they lack enough people of one group to 'gang up' against another group. The text once more displays parallel (and comic) manoeuvres depicting two entirely opposing concepts, namely an openly racist Whitechapel and the allegedly liberal neighbourhood of Willesden. Due to these comic and imagery parallelisms, it is safe to argue that Alsana's two albeit opposite neighbourhoods represent two sides of the same coin, namely xenophobia in its manifest and its dormant form. Alsana distrusts the former for the racist violence she has endured and the latter for the xenophobic potential creeping underneath its tolerant façade. Her disparaging comment ('No one was more liberal … anyway') on cultural inclusion reflects what I consider one of the novel's crucial statements on racism and tolerance: hostility and discrimination of others are ever-present and undeniable emotions hiding in every neighbourhood and within every human being. It is only due to lack of xenophobic diatribes and 'ganging up' that tolerance of others is of superficially lasting nature. One has to

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[68] "Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech," *The Telegraph* 6 Nov. 2007, 9 Jan. 2013 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>.

admit that this conclusion is as radical, as it is cynical.

As if by a command, Alsana's diagnosis comes true in an environment the reader has least expected: the Iqbal household itself. At the sight of the falling Berlin wall on TV, Samad shakes his head at the inflow of people pouring into the Western parts of the city:

> 'Foolishness. Massive immigration problem to follow,' said Samad to the television, dipping a dumpling into some ketchup. 'You just can't let a million people into a rich country. Recipe for disaster.' 'And who does he think he is? Mr Churchill-gee?' laughed Alsana scornfully. 'Original whitecliffsdover piesnmash jellyeels royalvariety britishbulldog, heh?' (*WT* 241)

The narrator once more evokes parallels between entities that seem irreconcilable: the white and xenophobic politician Enoch Powell and the immigrant waiter Samad Iqbal. Samad's outrage at the immigrant 'invasion' in Berlin resonates with Powell's indignation at immigrant inflow, as the following example from Powell's speech shows: "We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants … . It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre" ("Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech" n. pag.). Ironically enough, the immigrant Samad falls prey to the same slogans as his xenophobic boss Kelvin Hero, who would "spit on that Enoch Powell … but then … all he was saying is enough is enough after a certain point" (*WT* 72). Samad's parroting of Powellist shibboleths is more than textual play with parallel incongruities; it is also blatant irony. As an immigrant who has escaped the xenophobic neighbourhood of Whitechapel where Powellists have smashed his windows, Samad reproduces the same xenophobic catchphrases ensued to discriminate immigrant workers like himself. Certainly, the comic potential lying in Samad's outrage stems from his complete ignorance of his own situation and his failure to form solidarity with immigrant newcomers. As Bergson reminds us, "a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious" (9). The text counters Samad's slogans with Alsana's outrage as a gross and exaggerated confrontation with all the 'nonsense' that Samad is parroting. Alsana talks herself into fury with a mash of cartoonish stereotypes of white Englishness (neologisms such as 'piesnmash', 'britishbulldog'). By directing a rhetorical question at Samad, Alsana serves as an instant mirror for Samad's delusion about fear of immigration from a long-time resident perspective; for Samad is precisely *that* what he protests against, a newcomer to the rich West. Even the food imagery in this scene exposes the absurdness behind Samad's rant at immigration as he is

simultaneously dipping a dumpling in some ketchup; one is tempted to read it as a culinary symbol of immigrant arrival (dumpling) to the West (ketchup)[69] and a textual opposition and commentary to what is being said.

Racist slogans, 'the oldest sentences in the world', pervade the novel. However, with the help of irony and (incongruous) parallelisms, *White Teeth* makes easy assignments difficult. At first sight, Alsana appears a critical commentary of xenophobia: Claire Squires suggests that "she is aware of the hypocrisies of both west and east … and as such provides a voice of comic reason in *White Teeth*" (31). However, it is safe to predict that at some point, every slogan and attitude – be that discrimination towards others *or* dismissal of xenophobia – boomerangs in *White Teeth*. Consequently, Alsana is caught in the act of racism herself: she despises black people, racially mixed couples and their 'indefinable' children:

> 'Who are [Archie and Clara]?' [Alsana] slammed her little fist on to the kitchen table, sending the salt and pepper flying, to collide spectacularly with each other in the air. 'I don't know them! You fight in an old, forgotten war with some Englishman…married to a black! . . . . These are the people my child will grow up around? Their children – half blacky-white?' (*WT* 61)

Once more the text resorts to food imagery to generate a curious opposition to Alsana's disgust of black-and-white couples and their 'half blacky-white' children: as she slams her hand on to the table, Alsana provokes an almost supernatural image: the collision of 'white' salt and 'black' pepper sent to the air by Alsana's fist of racial outrage. Having dismissed (covert) xenophobia with 'silly-billy' and 'hosh-kosh' nonsense (*WT* 62 f), Alsana now expresses her racial disgust in similar fashion ('half blacky-white'). Despite Alsana's intuition for latent and racist behaviour in her surroundings, she is blind to her own categorization of 'others' according to which Archie is 'some Englishman', Clara is 'black' and their children are mongrels. The sympathy of the reader that she might have acquired as a critical observer of xenophobia is dampened by the narrator's comic exposure of her own prejudices. Alsana's inner attitude is on further comic display the very moment she sits together with Clara:

> Black people are often friendly, thought Alsana, smiling at Clara, and adding this fact subconsciously to the short 'pro' side of the pro and con list she had on the black girl. From every minority she disliked, Alsana liked to single out

[69] It is not the first time that the text plays with culinary images to portray the 'mentality' of a culture or use it as an image of culture fusion: Samad himself draws parallels between the state of a country and customer impatience (*WT* 207) and thinks it is a bad idea to know a girl before marriage as it is a bad English "customary to boil vegetables until they fall apart" (*WT* 98).

> one specimen for spiritual forgiveness. From Whitechapel, there had been many such redeemed characters. Mr Van, the Chinese chiropodist, Mr Segal, a Jewish carpenter, Rosie, a Dominican woman who continuously popped around, much to Alsana's grievance and delight, in an attempt to convert her into a Seventh-Day Adventist – all these lucky individuals were given Alsana's golden reprieve and magically extrapolated from their skins like Indian tigers. (*WT* 65)

In a sarcastic manner, the narrator lays bare Alsana's personal racial and cultural practice towards minorities. Alsana's friendliness towards Clara is accompanied by generalizations made about all black people registered in simple categories of 'pros' and 'cons'. Alsana's suspicion and dislike of Chinese, Jewish and black minorities remains; however, the Bangladeshi woman picks out 'specimen' of every group as alibi characters towards which she is more generous. With these unicums, Alsana is particularly patronising; that she acts from on high is indicated by the fact that she considers them 'redeemed', 'lucky individuals' that can only benefit from her 'golden reprieve'. Alsana's thought process is covert; it is only due to the sarcastic insight offered by the omniscient narrator that the reader is better informed than the characters involved. Alsana is prone to racial generalizations of other races based upon her acquaintances with one person; yet, she continues to show her disapproval towards entire minority groups out of which she picks one darling in a patronising manner. Conclusively, when Alsana claims that she is "as liberal as the next person", her declaration is broken to pieces in passages that unmask her as xenophobic as the environment she criticizes. And yet, when Alsana declares that no person is more liberal than any other person (*WT* 63), it is a statement made in the novel that has universal quality as it applies to all characters, black and white, even to Alsana herself.

Even characters of black *and* white origin tend to gravitate towards one group and condemn the other, although that disposition means that they exclude one half of their own identity. One such character is Hortense Bowden, Clara's grandmother and the child of Ambrosia Bowden, a black Jamaican and Captain Charlie Durham, a colonial serviceman. As she finds out that her daughter Clara will marry the white Englishman Archie, Hortense repudiates her daughter based upon her racial principles:

> When Hortense Bowden, half white herself, got to hearing about Clara's marriage, she came round to the house, stood on the doorstep, said, 'Understand: I and I don't speak from this moment forth,' turned on her heel and was true to her word. Hortense hadn't put all that effort into marrying black, into dragging her genes back from the brink, just so her daughter could bring yet more high-coloured children into the world. (*WT* 327)

The narrator highlights an obvious paradox: Hortense Bowden is a 'high-coloured' child herself, but refuses to accept interracial marriage for the sake of black racial purity. Hortense's misapprehension is accompanied with a curious information on the importance of the personal pronoun 'I': in Jamaican grammar, no other pronouns are known except for the "pure homogenous *I*" (*WT* 327, emphasis in the original). When Hortense utters that it is 'I and I' that break contact, she announces her own separation from her daughter Clara, whom she now considers racially insufficient. On a deeper level, Hortense's awkward phrase signals an inner split, an internal discrimination of her own 'whiteness'; by insisting on racial purity and parting with her daughter, Hortense Bowden has indeed parted with her interracial self. As we learn throughout the novel, Hortense's principles of racial separation prevent her from judging Archie, her white son-in-law, by what "a peacekeeper" and "a level-headed sort of a fellow" he is (*WT* 384); in short, Hortense is ready to sacrifice Archie's human sides in favour of "de principle of de ting, you know? Black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up. Dat's why he made a hol' heap a fuss about de children of men building de tower of Babel" (*WT* 384 f). Hortense's principles of racial separation and discrimination are fuelled by the biblical image of the tower of Babel and the mankind's attempt to unite underneath. In Hortense's view, mingling of cultures is merely an accident that 'de Lord Jesus' has struggled to reverse.

According to Meinig, Hortense's rigid world-view – 'Bowden millennianism' basing on the revelations of Jehovah and racial separation – is a direct response to racial and sexual colonial exploitation inflicted upon her family and her past in Jamaica that continues to shape Hortense's identity even after her arrival in Britain (Meinig 254). In my view, it is a far stretch from the colonial practice of Othering as a cause assisting in Hortense's readiness to repudiate her daughter (and her own 'white' self). For a start, one can only speculate on the question how much discrimination and intolerance of others has existed *before* the colonial enterprise in Jamaica. If we take this notion further, the logical conclusion would be a pure and entirely innocent pre-colonial world that became infested with discriminatory thinking and categorization of others only *after* the colonial invasion. What I find more important is the observation that Hortense radically discriminates against her daughter and her son-in-law on behalf of the same principles of racial separation imposed upon her family in Jamaica. Tthis way, Hortense mutates from the status of a victim of colonial racism into that of a racial perpetrator against her own kin. What

the novel seems to suggest is that the status of a victim of racial oppression and xenophobia does not make one tolerant by default and compassionate with other individuals in the same situation. On the contrary, as demonstrated in the cases above, victims of racist violence and discrimination are not immune against that very same disposition. Against the logic that the exclusion of others based upon racial markers is a product of colonial 'corruption' of its colonies, I conclude that intolerance and discrimination of others are human potentialities that lurk even in minority groups and victims of racism and come to the surface in various forms.

With his friendship with the Bangladeshi Samad and his marriage with the Jamaican Clara, Archie Jones represents a character that is least likely to show signs of racial exclusion. As Phillips suggests, Archie is an emblem of a fast-changing mixed-up post-colonial world that allows for no easy categories of races and cultures (338); in other words, Archie is 'too involved' to be xenophobic. And yet, not even Archie is immune to signifiers of racial distinction and the political implications they contain. As he meets Samad for the first time, Archie cannot help but stare at a soldier with the "warm colour of baked bread" (*WT* 83) in his battalion. Archie's bewilderment at the sight of a non-white soldier in a British army is certainly milder than the response of Mr Hamilton, a war veteran of the Empire, to this idea: "There were certainly no wogs [in the army] as I remember" (*WT* 172). Archie's cross-cultural friendship with Samad arises from the fact that they are both trapped in a war province where they only have each other; the narrator outlines Archie's motives and expectations from this friendship that are illustrative of all Englishmen:

> [I]t was precisely the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday, that he can make only on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and colour, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue. (*WT* 96)

The narrator ironically comments on Archie's 'English' understanding of intercultural friendships; it appears that they exist only because they are considered temporary. Accordingly, the comradeship between the two men is one-sided: while Samad is thrilled about the kindness of his new English friend, Archie is far more reserved and gently irritated at best (*WT* 103). In general, the comic effects pervading the portrayal of Archie Jones are considerably milder than the biting irony and sarcasm with which the narrative voice comments on instances of overt racism and discrimination. As Ramsey-Kurz suggests, Archie Jones is "probably the most sympathetic, peace-loving and likeable protagonist in the novel" (80). As anticipated, Archie is a far cry

from Samad's rejection of immigrant workers or Hortense's repudiation of her own child. Nevertheless, the narrator comically hints at more subliminal levels of racial distinction and exclusion visible in Archie's character. As he invites his friend and his wife for the first time, Archie explains his wife Clara how relaxed and unpretentious the Iqbals are about food customs:

> 'For God's sake, they're not *those* kind of Indians,' said Archie irritably. 'Sam'll have a Sunday roast like the next man. . . . . I've known Sam for years, and his wife seems a quiet sort. They're not the royal family, you know. They're not *those* kind of Indians,' he repeated, and shook his head, troubled by some problem, some knotty feeling he could not entirely unravel. (*WT* 54, emphasis in the original)

Archie's repeated discomfort after his reassurance that the Iqbal's are 'not *those* kind of Indians' is indicative of a discrimination of such an elusive nature that Archie himself is not able to wrap his mind around. Archie's distinction of races and cultures operates on a deeper and less obvious level: Archie distinguishes between two sorts of Indians: an amorphous and unfamiliar group of people rigorously insisting on religious food customs *and* the Iqbals as their positive and familiar counterparts. Apart from the fact that he mistakes the Bangladeshi Iqbals for an Indian family, the dubiousness of Archie's relationship with other races is satirised more heavily when the narrative voice observes that the Iqbals "were not *those* kind of Indians … as, in Archie's mind, Clara was not *that* kind of black" (*WT* 54 emphasis in the original). The italics reflect Archie's emphasis in his thought process; they also reveal that for Archie, there are two sorts of Indians and two sorts of black people: those that he knows and has domesticated and those that *he* also perceives as different and 'other'. Compared to Alsana Iqbal's almost caricature-like appreciation of single individuals and outright dismissal of their minority groups, Archie's discrimination of races is palpable, but less easy to grasp. More than other white characters in the novel, Archie Jones is emotionally involved in cross-cultural relationships and friendships; however, his engagements do not prevent him from thinking in more generalised racial and cultural categories. This is also visible in the less aggressive tone of textual mockery; as regards racial distinction and hostility, Archie comes far less under comic attack than Samad, Alsana, Hortense or their white English counterparts.

As previously stated, much has been said about 'white' racism in *White Teeth*, with the focus of academic critique lying on some of its major representatives as the

Chalfen Family or Mr Hamilton.[70] The comic manoeuvres around these characters are examples of the novel's sharpest satirical tone, for example when the Chalfens declare that they find "brown strangers really stimulating" (*WT* 326) or when Mr Hamilton's army service in Congo, where "the only way I could identify the nigger was by the whiteness of his teeth" (*WT* 171). It is safe to argue that, the more serious the racist connotations, the more aggressive the comic tone of the narrator becomes. Mr Hamilton and the Chalfens can be considered caricatures of neo-colonial racism and patronization combined with fake tolerance. As regards more marginal white characters, the narrative operates with comic effects that 'suit' the nature of their xenophobia; racist subtleties are uncovered with irony and slight sarcasm. Archie's workplace appears a breeding ground for characters with latent racist attitudes; it is only after Archie's interracial marriage and the birth of his daughter Irie that many layers of xenophobic thinking in the office come to the surface. As Archie breaks the news of his wife's pregnancy and the possibility that the child might be blue-eyed, Mauren the receptionist is secretly repelled:

> 'Did you say *blue eyes*, Archie, love?' said Maureen, speaking slowly so she might find a way to phrase it. 'I'm not bein' funny...but in't your wife, well, *coloured*?' Archie shook his head wonderingly. 'I know! Her and me have a child, the genes mix up, and blue eyes! Miracle of nature!' 'Oh yes, miracle,' said Maureen tersely, thinking that was a polite word for what it was. (*WT* 69, emphasis in the original)

The comic tension between Maureen and Archie is generated by the hardly concealable contrast between Maureen's hostile sarcasm and Archie's naivety. Maureen is a xenophobe through and through: her remark on not being 'funny' (or, in other words, racist) is reversed by narrative derision and exposure; Archie's delight at his 'miracle of nature' is countered by Maureen's covert assault. Archie's open-mindedness and tolerance of others is unprecedented and looked upon with suspicion in this office; as he weds a Jamaican, Archie is exposed to both hidden and more obvious assaults at the cost of his non-white wife and friends. The narrative voice slips into Maureen's perspective and portrays the process of thought of a racist horrified at "this strange way [Archie] had about him, always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice and now he'd gone and married one and hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was" (*WT* 69). Archie's colour-blindness to non-white people he considers close is grossly countered by an

[70] Squires (2002); Head (2003); Walters ("Still Mammies").

unspoken system of racial categorization operating in his office. Maureen's sarcastic entry is followed by Archie's meeting with his boss Kelvin Hero who, as Maureen, has never considered himself "a racialist" (*WT* 70); it is under this self-proclamation that the text dissects Kelvin's behaviour as *exactly that*. Kelvin's plan is difficult: as Archie's wife Clara has caused disturbance among his white employees before, Kelvin is secretly determined to uninvite the couple from another office dinner. His hypocrisy is almost painfully counter-balanced by Archie's artlessness as "looking at Archie Jones is like looking at something that expects to be clubbed around the head any second" (*WT* 71). As Archie is entirely clueless, his frequent inquiries literally entrap Kelvin Hero in a grid of lies and revelations. What is revealed is that the 'non-racialist' Kelvin Hero shows clandestine admiration of Powellist standpoints on immigration, he is irritated at Archie's 'strange' tolerant attitude and he makes sexually loaded hints at Archie's wife as an object of white female's envy and white male's desire. All the while, Archie remains puzzled:

> '[T]here's some people around here, Arch – and I don't include myself here – who just feel your attitude is a little *strange*.' 'Strange?' 'You see the wives don't like it because, let's face it, she's a sort, a real beauty – incredible legs, Archie, I'd like to congratulate you on them legs – and the men, well, the men don't like it 'cos they don't like to think they're wanting a bit of the other when they're sitting down to a company dinner with their lady wives, especially when she's...*you know*...they don't know what to make of that at all.' 'Who?' 'What?' 'Who are we talking about, Mr Hero?' (*WT* 72, emphasis in the original)

This passage oozes biting situational comedy: it is once more Archie's naivety that serves both as a catalyst and as a contrast to Kelvin Hero's racist mindset. The firm boss' true nature is revealed by Archie's innocent questions; his attempts to explain and excuse Archie's banning result in an open farce of a racist mind caught in his own lies. The colour of Clara's skin remains an ellipse in this conversation, ('especially when she's...*you know*...') yet it is the unsaid that is laid bare in front of the reader: racial thinking is part of Kelvin Hero's personal world-view and an unwritten office policy.

Be it Archie's folding paper company or the Iqbal household in Willesden: *White Teeth* discloses xenophobic or racist behaviour and thinking as a phenomenon of permanent universality. No sphere and character is sacrosanct against exclusion of others based upon racial markers or minority or immigrant status. Phrases such as 'I am liberal as the next person' or 'I am not a racialist' give way to 'the oldest sentence in the world' at the beginning of this section as a mantra running in humanity.

Although the novel ridicules and dismisses all forms of hatred and exclusion of the alien, it does not offer an anti-racist counter-agenda. Instead, its all-encompassing comic dissection of xenophobic characters of all backgrounds suggests a humanist approach to racial issues in *White Teeth*. The novel acknowledges the continuity and ubiquity of racism not as a constant strategy of the white population only but as a human potential coming to surface among all parts of society. As such, *White Teeth* abandons the post-colonial frame of debating racism as a predominantly 'white' phenomenon.

3.3 Hybridity Revisited: Remnants of Post-Colonial Hybridity in Light of Human Inconsistencies

A range of 'classic' post-colonial parameters and concerns have been applied as crucial instruments with which critics have further cemented the status of *White Teeth* as a post-colonial novel. Hybridity and belonging have been the most prominent examples of post-colonial tools of analysis. As my examinations of the novel's comic effects will show, these post-colonial concepts in fact come under the novel's attack. Fundamentally, Dunphy and Emig state that hybridity can both have a 'happy' and a 'sad' outcome as some immigrants manage to combine the various cultures in which they live into a fruitful and constructive identity; others struggle to find a synthesis between two cultural zones and resign in frustration over not belonging to either of them (30). Interestingly enough, the critics argue that humour serves as a narrative instrument effective to depict both facets of hybrid experience (Dunphy and Emig 30). Dunphy and Emig make a valid point about the comic portrayal of ambiguous outcomes of hybridity. However, my premise goes even further: *White Teeth*'s comic thematization of hybridity aims at the core of this concept and challenges its validity in an environment that oozes extremist thinking. Or, to ask more bluntly, what is the use of promotion and glorification of hybridity when it is blatantly absent in the minds and manners of human beings?

Naturally, my hypothesis collides with critics who have hailed *White Teeth* as the literary advocate of hybridity as a positive and constructive post-colonial concept. Head goes as far as to say that in *White Teeth*, "we are all hybrid post-colonials, biologically as well as culturally, and the pursuit of pure ethnic origins is a pointless objective" (114). Though he mentions that Smith embraces the "contradictory and haphazard nature" of hybridity (114), Head gives no answer to what this ambiguous nature of

hybridity could be. Eva Knopp argues that the comic impulses in *White Teeth* help to advance the novel's positive notion of cultural hybridity:

> Humorous instances that transgress the established discourse of identity and play with racial and cultural stereotypes are a useful device for negotiating the transcultural make-up of British identities by simultaneously subverting and reaffirming participation in ethnic-minority and mainstream discourses, thus promoting notions of cultural hybridity and transculturality. (Knopp 65)

For both critics, hybridity in Smith's novel serves as an ideological battering ram against thoughts of purity and a racially unified nationhood. Other critical voices have a more moderated approach to the portrayal of hybridity in *White Teeth*. In her essay "The Politics of Everyday Hybridity", Moss discusses hybridity (and racism, for that matter) as a legacy of the society's colonial past, which permeates society as a daily practice – and not as an ideal (15). Moss claims that the novel has a very matter-of-fact approach towards hybridity and the way it operates especially in the second generation of immigrants in Britain (14). In a similar manner, Jonathan Sell states that the portrayal of hybridity in *White Teeth* is far more realistic than, for instance, the excess of hybridity in a fantastic future visible in Salman Rushdie's work:

> It is novelists like Smith who deliver Rushdie's future in their realistic view of present-day multicultural identity. Even if *White Teeth* was still stalked by some denizens of Rushdie's fabulous world, … by and large hyperbolic hybridity was cut down to quotidian, human size. (Sell 33)

It seems as though both critics have 'trimmed' their perception of a post-colonial ideal down to its realization in everyday life. From my perspective, however, the expression 'everyday hybridity' still remains a vacant term. Elaine Childs correctly states that it is too simplistic to claim that hybridity has now entered our daily life and "is merely the place where we all now live" (8). She points to the fact that many of the characters in the novel fall back on religious practice as a means of orientation and creation of identity, particularly in the face of hybridity as a source of angst (E. Childs 8). McLeod acknowledges the fact that London's hybrid environment causes a painfully split identity and consciousness (McLeod, "Revisiting Postcolonial London" 40). McLeod sees a relationship between the randomness and insecurity of a hybrid metropolis and what he calls 'faith', an attempt to secure a fixed position in such an environment: "Everybody, the novel seems to suggest, needs faith in something in order to help them ride the randomness and protean aspects of the metropolis, perhaps more so than those who live in less uncertain locations" ("Revisiting Postcolonial London" 41). For McLeod, this pursuit of 'faith' is visible in the mixed-and-matched identities of the

second generation; this hybrid approach to the creation of 'faith' represents a crucial part in what McLeod refers to as 'vernacular cosmopolitanism'[71] ("Revisiting Postcolonial London" 41). Tew is more critical of hybrid identities in *White Teeth*: in his response to McLeod, he observes that, for instance, Millat Iqbal's hybrid mix of Western Hollywood culture and Eastern traditionalism has not resulted in 'faith' but in an extremist world-view which restrains a plurality of identities (Tew 54).

My analysis dovetails with Tew's objection: critics seem to salute the fact that the characters in *White Teeth* draw from many sources to create new hybrid identities. It seems an innocent approach to me to claim that out of two extreme cultural poles will arise hybrid identities that then apprehend and appreciate their own hybridity and tolerate hybrid backgrounds, world-views and lifestyles of others. My focal point of concern lies therefore on the novel's indeed very ironic approach to the following questions: to what extent does *White Teeth* thematize hybridity as a source of anxiety that fuels relapse into deterministic world-views? In what way can we truly speak of hybridity, if the outcome of a hybrid identity is an essentialist belief? And last but not least, is it legitimate to speak of a hybrid society in which every person drifts into his or her own exclusivist belief? Is hybridity then, only a patchwork of hybridly created dogmatic world-views?

Far from the post-colonial approval of hybridity as *the* concept that best captures and creates the plurality of cultures in Britain, *White Teeth* cuts hybridity down to its "human size" (Sell 33). While post-colonial discourse discusses the structure and benefits of hybridity as a theoretical concept, Smith's novel dives into the human experience of hybridity. Not only has thinking in essentialist categories continued to exist, it is inevitably intertwined with hybridity, turning the latter into a more complex and delicate concept than post-colonial commentators have been able to conceive (or are ready to admit). What the novel explores is that in fact, not even hybridity as a promotion of blurred delineations between categories of race, culture and religion is immune to what it opposes the most, namely dogmatic thinking. As a matter of fact, it can be enforced and established as any other hermetic ideology, namely as an agenda of compelled intermixture of cultures for the sake of mutual fertilisation and benefit (Ahokas 127). Ahokas correctly observes that the practice of

[71] John McLeod defines 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' as follows: "By the phrase 'vernacular cosmopolitanism', adapted from Homi Bhabha, I am referring to the innovative new forms of expression created out of the hybridising, carnivalesque encounters of different kinds of Londoners, especially migrants" ("Revisiting Postcolonial London" 39).

"compelled hybridity" is firstly seen in *White Teeth*'s portrayal of colonial enterprise (127); Sir Edmund Glenard is regarded as the colonial trendsetter of this phenomenon: noticing that one culture lacks what another seems to possess in plenty, Glenard sees his opportunity for a cultural exchange:

> One was impressed by the Jamaican's faith but despairing of his work ethic and education. Vice versa, one admired the Englishman's work ethic and education but despaired of his poorly kept faith. And now, as Sir Edmund turned to go back to his estate, he realized that he was in a position to influence the situation - nay, more than that - transform it! Sir Edmund, who was a fairly corpulent man, a man who looked as if he might be hiding another man within him, practically skipped all the way home. (*WT* 305)

Pro-active blending of cultures for the purpose of erasing their respective deficiencies is a dubious enterprise, as the narrative voice suggests. The text comically counters Glenard's 'strike of a genius' with a cartoonish image of an obese man leaping for joy as he visualizes the benefits behind his idea. As we are confronted with the consequences of Glenard's cross-cultural experiment, textual cartoonishness merges into bitter narrative cynicism. The English education of Glenard's Jamaican workers has had disastrous consequences as they "were … entirely sensible of the subjunctive mood, the nine times table, the life and times of William the Conqueror and the nature of an equilateral triangle, but they were hungry" (*WT* 307). The entire undertaking collapses: the Jamaicans suffer hunger, crime and alienation that some of them compensate with their participation at the British Empire exhibition, performing, as the narrator assures us, "horrible simulacrum of their previous existence – tin drums, coral necklaces – for they were English now, more English than the English by virtue of their disappointments" (*WT* 307). What is more, the textual parallels uncover the blatant irony that under the patronage of Sir Glenard, the Glenard Oak School perpetuates the very same questionable practice of enforced hybridity for the sake of mutual benefits. At the idea to bring children of "disadvantaged or minority backgrounds" into white intellectual families, the headmaster of the school falls into a state of overjoyed cartoonish trance, just as his colonial predecessor: "'And there could be exchange, vice versa. . . . . We could get *funding*.' At the magic word *funding*, the headmaster's sunken eyes began to disappear beneath agitated lids" (*WT* 308, emphasis in the original). As a consequence, Irie Jones and Millat Iqbal are sent to the intellectual Chalfen family for educational reasons, as they 'lack' order, discipline and have poor school performance.

The structure of the plot obtrudes the continuity of 'compelled hybridity' throughout from the past to the present: the Chalfen family is introduced by a book chapter on hybridity of plants as published by Joyce Chalfen, a horticulturist and fierce advocate of cross-fertilization: "In the garden, as in the social and political arena, change should be the only constant. Our parents and our parents' petunias have learnt this lesson the hard way" (*WT* 309). However, the narrator signals that Joyce's zeal for change and mélange can easily excess into "[t]ough love" (*WT* 317): to save her delphinium from spreading thrips, Joyce ruthlessly cuts the blossoms of the plant, "doing this for the delphinium" (*WT* 316). Joyce's botanical activity has precedence effect to a bizarre revelation delivered by an insight into her thoughts: Joyce Chalfen will look at (and treat) Irie Jones and Millat Iqbal the same way as her floral protégés:

> There was a quiet pain in the first one (*Irieanthus negressium marcusilia*), a lack of a father figure perhaps, an intellect untapped, a low self-esteem; and in the second (*Millaturea brandolidia joyculatus*) there was a deeper sadness, a terrible loss, a gaping wound. A hole that needed more than education or money. That needed love. Joyce longed to touch the site with the tip of her Chalfen greenfinger, close the gap, knit the skin. (*WT* 324, emphasis in the original)

What appears to be Joyce's genuine personal interest in care and positive exertion of influence on Irie and Millat, also has its backside, as 'the tip of her Chalfen greenfinger' also means 'tough love' and excessive patronization. As coercive hybridization implies a quid pro quo, the narrator informs us with biting scorn that Irie Jones and Millat Iqbal are 'brown strangers' with a stimulating effect on the Chalfen family. The only Chalfen suspicious of this mutual fertilization is little Oscar, an impudent 6-year-old, who, in a prognosticating manner declares that he 'hates brown strangers' while spitting in Irie's ear (*WT* 326). The Chalfen-Iqbal-Jones experiment is equally a mess as its historical test case undertaken with Jamaican and English workers: the more the protagonists become involved, the more irritated they become with each other. Joyce Chalfen's obsession with Millat Iqbal frustrates her son Joshua Chalfen to leave the family; Irie Jones gravitates towards Marcus Chalfens patronage at genetic engineering only to find out that a far more promising Magid Iqbal, a returnee to the Iqbal family, is replacing her. Finally, it is Alsana Iqbal, who – in a somewhat melodramatic manner – dismisses the Chalfen family for their well-meant cross-cultural undertaking for the sake of mutual benefit:

> I'll call them Chaffinches – little scavenging English birds pecking at all the best seeds! Those birds do the same to my bay leaves as these people do to my boy. But they are *worse*; they are like birds with teeth, with sharp little canines – they don't just steal, they rip apart! (*WT* 344, emphasis in the original)

Alsana's critique may be histrionic, but it resonates throughout the novel: in *White Teeth*, hybridity is not a super-elevated ideal but a daily (compelled) practise that leads to catastrophic results. As a matter of fact, the rigid promotion of hybridity as a universal remedy can be adverse to its initial effects: the more humans are meant to 'cure' each other's deficiencies via cultural exchange, the more damage they can ironically cause.

As the above examples show, hybridity is not the cure for whatever imperfections cultures have. Likewise, the novel challenges the post-colonial premise that hybridity is a state of being that does justice to the post-colonial condition as "we are all hybrid post-colonials, biologically as well as culturally, and the pursuit of pure ethnic origins is a pointless objective" (Head 114). We may all be hybrids, but what implications does this realization have from the daily human perspective? The picture of hybridity as drawn by comic brushstrokes in *White Teeth* shows a flawed concept and an uncomfortable truth: hybridity is one possible root of dogmatic thinking and a state of utmost anxiety and disorientation. First of all, Dohra Ahmad is right to observe that in *White Teeth*, modern fundamentalisms such as militant Islam are portrayed as hybrid concepts (D. Ahmad n. pag.). In her argument, Ahmad refers to the 'Raggastani' teenage group around Millat Iqbal and their mixed-and-matched manifesto:

> Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah featured, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck geezer who would fight in their corner if necessary; Kung Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani. (*WT* 231 f, emphasis in original)

References to culture and lifestyle accentuate the hybrid nature of the group and the way the youngsters have transformed many concepts and turned them into their own including the image of Allah, the use of language and the combination of martial arts with political messages. Their mélange of language, styles and creeds is paradigmatic for Homi Bhabha's understanding of hybrid identities in Third Space where cultural

markers and symbols (such as religious imagery, language or music) are reinterpreted and transformed and where fixated pillars of culture do not apply (Bhabha 37). However, repercussions of hybridity do not stop at this stage: a hybrid identity serves a purpose. According to Bhabha, hybrid individuals are there to interrogate boundaries and expose "the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race" (219). In a future where hybridity is instrumental to creation of identity and culture, so Bhabha, "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" (39). The purpose of the Raggastani cult, however, is entirely incompatible with Bhabha's ambitions. The teenagers have without doubt created a new, unprecedented cult of language, music and ways of expression; and yet, one must say, it is a cult after all. The Raggastanis have a language, religious entity, an agenda, idols, icons and music as markers that delineate them from other groups and from the mainstream in particular. By drawing from different sources they may have smashed their conceptual borders, but they have created another rigid set of beliefs and behaviour as a means of empowerment and essentialisation ('put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani'). The 'hybrid' Raggastanis have created a new category of distinction, upon which they are ready to act against anything that does not suit their agenda. In short, they are "trouble" (*WT* 232). Having identified Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* as 'blasphemous shit' (*WT* 234) against their own cult, the Raggastanis participate in a public burning of the book (*WT* 233). The alleged hybridity of their clique is sarcastically countered by the textual invocation of religious images such as Allah, blasphemy or even a kind of censorship and violent excommunication in the act of burning the book of a heretic. At this point, their hybridity can be called in question, as what they have created through reinterpretation and transformation of symbols is only yet another cult that insists on its homogeneity and sanctity.

The interdependent connection between hybridity and outright religious fundamentalism is even sharpened in form of KEVIN, a militant group called the *Keepers of Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation* that even accommodates some of the former Raggastanis, namely Hifan and Millat. As with their predecessors, the narrator accentuates the blatancy of their hybrid background:

> [T]he idea of KEVIN had been born within the black and Asian community. A radical new movement where politics and religion were two sides of the same coin. A group that took freely from Garveyism, the American Civil Rights

> movement and the thought of Elijah Muhammed, yet remained within the letter of the Qur'ān … .(*WT* 470)

Certainly, the comic tension derives from the bizarre realization that KEVIN's essentialist outset is virtually turned on its head by the hybrid mix of ideas supporting this ideology. What is more, with this hybrid ideology (plus the obvious Anglo-Saxon acronym), KEVIN justifies the unification of religion and state, their "direct, often violent action" (*WT* 470), recruitment of new members and hate sermons against the corrupt West delivered by their founder, Brother Ibrāhīm, unmasked as the formerly Barbadian and Presbyterian Monty Clyde Benjamin (*WT* 469). It is legitimate to argue that these comic hints at the hybrid core of essentialist ideas and groups belie their own rigidness and homogeneity as in *White Teeth*, fundamentalist ideas are undoubtedly under fire. However, from Bhabha's post-colonial perspective, this peculiar paradox of 'hybrid fundamentalism' is unimaginable, as hybridity is a form of practice and negotiation that challenges any authority lying in fixed markers of culture and abolishes delineations outlining certain categories. Consequently, this urges the following question: what is the quality of hybridity in *White Teeth* when its outcomes are thus radical? Or even: *is* that post-colonial hybridity altogether? Based on the aforementioned examples, I postulate that the hybridity exposed in *White Teeth* differs from the hybridity originating within post-colonial thought. In Smith's novel, hybridity is a cultural practice reduced to mixing-and-matching of symbols and ideas to create new cults and new golden calves to worship and defend against others. It is an instrument useful to create and back up new hermetic ideologies, not an end purpose in itself; it does not lead to a greater understanding of the cultural elements involved nor does it establish tolerance or bridges of translation. In my view, it is even safe to argue that *White Teeth* is not primarily about hybridity, but about continuous creation of new hybrid fundamentalisms.

The above examples show that hybridity needs to be re-evaluated as an ideal that abolishes boundaries and polarities between opposite poles of culture. What is more, the comic tone in *White Teeth* uncovers even more inconsistencies immanent to that post-colonial concept. Hybridity is re-negotiated not as a dynamic practice of creation of identity, but as a "source of anxiety for many of *White Teeth*'s characters" (E. Childs 8). In *White Teeth*, hybridity is a phenomenon and state of identity that impedes acceptance of others and of the self. In a more sombre passage, the narrative

voice portrays "the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white" (*WT* 326) as a hybrid playground with children of all cultures, religions and skin colours serving as a metaphor for present-day Britain. Devoid of any comedic style, the narrator points to the continuous hatred of other races and cultures now even more fuelled by the presence of hybridity:

> [D]espite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover's bed after a midnight walk), despite all this, it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist. (*WT* 327, emphasis in the original)

The emphasis of this passage lies on the 'anger' of those who perceive Britain as a homogenous and pure nation and are provoked by the fact that now, a hybrid nation has to redefine itself. Or as Phillips puts it: "For those of a colonial mindset, this swirling postcolonial world is blurring distinctions and challenging received wisdoms at an alarming rate" (Phillips n. pag.). In other words, the presence of hybridity in Britain cannot be seen as a bulwark against xenophobia but as a phenomenon that continues to provoke racist anxiety. More enthusiastic commentators such as Allen set their hopes on hybridity as an irreversible and powerful force of transformation of Britain's blueprint as a society where resisting hybridity or trying "to stop processes of heterogeneity is in fact pointless" (N. Allen 88). *White Teeth*, on the other hand, demonstrates that the mere existence of hybridity will not make racism disappear. After all, the novel unmasks racism and xenophobia as an unerasable potentiality of human nature that can be triggered by easy slogans, racist stereotypes or strategic stimulation of fear of the 'other'. Consequently, those individuals and groups that summon images of national and racial purity and homogeneity will always counter hybrid individuals.

It adds to the complexity of hybridity that in *White Teeth*, hybrid individuals do not even accept *each other*. Samad and Alsana Iqbal have long since incorporated symbols and practices of Western lifestyle; however, in a scene of shrill cartoonishness mixed with a bitter undertone, the spouses attack each other for the hybrid identities they have become:

> 'Look at you, look at the state of you! Look how *fat* you are!' He [Samad] grabbed a piece of her, and then released it as if it would infect him. 'Look how you dress. Running shoes and a sari? And what is that?' It was one of Clara's African headscarfs, a long, beautiful piece of orange Kenti cloth in

> which Alsana had taken to wrapping her substantial mane. Samad pulled it off and threw it across the room, leaving Alsana's hair to crash down her back. 'You do not even know what you are, where you come from. We never see family any more - I am ashamed to show you to them. *Why did you go all the way to Bengal for a wife*, that's what they ask. *Why didn't you just go to Putney?*' . . . . 'And that is a beautiful lungi you have on, Samad Miah,' [Alsana] said bitterly, nodding in the direction of his blue-towelling jogging suit topped off with Poppy's LA raiders baseball cap. (*WT* 198 f, emphasis in the original)

Ironically enough, Samad and Alsana mirror each other's mongrel identities, as both their clothes are a borrowed mix of styles and ethnic backgrounds. Both mock and abuse each other for their lack of Indian authenticity compensated by African headscarves, running shoes and baseball caps. Similarly, they are ridiculed by their own community, as Samad has gone all the way to Bengal for a wife that looks like she comes from an English neighbourhood. In this scene, hybridity of clothes is perceived as corruption by other cultures that eliminate any sense of true Bengaliness; Samad and Alsana are targets of textual irony as they accuse the other of a crime they have committed themselves. It is again their absentmindedness (Bergson 9) that reinforces the comic potential of this episode as both Samad and Alsana fail to recognize each other's hybrid identities and – their own. Their argument will degenerate into a fist fight after which Samad Iqbal will only be more determined to send one of his sons to Bangladesh to wave the flag of proper Islam on behalf of the Iqbal family (*WT* 201). The mixed-and-matched appearance of the Iqbals suggests that they indeed have forsaken more traditional forms of living and developed manifold lifestyles; however, they simply fail to recognise their hybrid identities. This lack of awareness results on the one hand in an utmost inability to accept other hybrid individuals for what they are. On the other hand, hybrid individuals are ready to inflict physical pain and mutual abuse upon each other as their hybrid counter-parts do not match preconceived outlined markers of cultural or religious affiliation. The question remains: can we label characters as hybrid for the mix of lifestyles they practice but that are otherwise entirely intolerant of the hybridity of others? How hybrid is an individual who accuses other hybrid characters of not being 'authentic' enough? *White Teeth* is certainly at pains to contour the multi-faceted identities of all its characters, thus accentuating the inevitability of hybridity. However, not one of these characters has gained self-awareness and acceptance or acceptance of others only by the virtue of being hybrid or having a hybrid lifestyle. Alsana's African headscarf and Samad's baseball cap may be hybrid choices of

fashion, but they have not altered their owner's predominantly essentialist mindsets. That indeed, is poor evidence of hybridity as a celebrated post-colonial practice that has the potential to transform nations into a commonly shared Third Space in which people "elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" (Bhabha 39). In *White Teeth*, Bhabha's agenda of hybridity simply collapses in light of the (violent) polarities it evokes. Acceptance of other hybrid individuals is absent, as is self-reflection.

A hybrid state of being further causes many internal anxieties within hybrid individuals. One of them is disorientation due to the irreconcilability of the many contrasting parts within the hybrid self. Millat Iqbal has been upheld by several critics as one of *the* representative characters for hybridity (McLeod, "Revisiting Postcolonial London" 42; Moss 14) as a youngster between Bengaliness and Englishness, the temptations of Hollywood and demands Islam, being "neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali; he lived for the in between, he lived up to his middle name, *Zulfikar*, the clashing of two swords" (*WT* 351, emphasis in the original). Neena, Millat's cousin, sketches a much more critical picture of Millat's in-betweenness, shaking her head at

> how confused he is. One day he's Allah this, Allah that. Next minute it's big busty blondes, Russian gymnasts and a smoke of the sinsemilla. He doesn't know his arse from his elbow. Just like his father. He doesn't know who he is. (*WT* 284)

In a derisive and somewhat vulgar fashion, Neena uncovers the troublesome layers underneath Millat's hybrid surface. Her juxtaposition of contrasting images ('one day Allah, next minute busty blondes') echoes Millat's conflicted impetuousness as he oscillates between several entirely opposing poles. Millat may have incorporated flashy gangster-like bow ties with his affiliation with KEVIN (*WT* 442), a combination that I would tend to label as "cute celebration of cultural hybridity", as Susie Thomas observes in a different context ("Zadie Smith's False Teeth" n. pag.). However, when it comes to core values of clashing belief systems such as Hollywood cinema, Islam and Millat's own reputation as seducer of blond English girls, Millat's hybrid integrity collides. Millat ditches Karina Kain, a white English girl and his only love because KEVIN preaches against the promiscuity of white women, Hollywood movies preach their loyalty and Millat does not trust his own feeling that he can trust Karina (*WT* 372 ff). Instead of creating an individual hybrid identity that would help him navigate his in-betweenness in zones of cultural contact, Millat is rather zig-zagging between opposing

poles he has marked out as his hybrid identity. As Neena sarcastically comments above, Millat is in a state of complete self-ignorance, as he heedlessly attempts to meld 'Allah' with 'blondes'. Also, we may not forget that the allegedly hybrid Millat Iqbal is in fact a fundamentalist and a terrorist, as "[h]is religious practice is … more extreme than that of any other character: he is a reactionary in the purest sense of the word" (E. Childs 10). As such, Millat represents the outset of virtually all hybrid characters in *White Teeth*: irrespective of how hybrid they might be, hybrid individuals gravitate towards highly essentialist positions. Millat himself is emblematic for confusion and an anxious restlessness visible within other equally hybrid characters in *White Teeth*, thus being an illustrative example of the precariousness of hybridity as a post-colonial concept. Via narrative commentaries, comments made by characters and manoeuvres such as irony and sarcasm, the novel refrains from the conventional post-colonial ideal of hybridity as a transforming mash of cultures that easily crosses and renegotiates boundaries of cultural frames. *White Teeth* comically dissects hybridity as *the* hailed concept potent enough to tackle in-betweenness and the plurality of cultures in the post-colonial spheres of contemporary Britain.

3.4 Human (Un-)Belonging and Fundamentalisms in *White Teeth*

> And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie...and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident.*
>
> - Samad Iqbal, *White Teeth*[72]

> What you never understand is that people are *extreme*. It would be wonderful if everyone was like your father, carrying on as normal even if the ceiling's coming down around his ears. But a lot of people can't do that.
>
> - Joyce Chalfen, *White Teeth*[73]

White Teeth tackles another concern to which post-colonial theory has been able to deliver only limited answers: the question of belonging. As previously outlined in the chapter on post-colonial theory, belonging is discussed as a highly complicated phenomenon in a hybrid, pluralistic environment as individuals occupy spaces between cultures that do not offer a fixed epicentre of identity (see e.g. Bromley 2000; McLeod 2000). As Aijaz Ahmad (16) and Gilroy (67) remind us, this urge to find a place one calls home or to return to familiar images of the world applies to both immigrants and

[72] *WT* 407, emphasis in the original.
[73] *WT* 436, emphasis in the original.

their descendants as well as the white English population. Certainly, it is legitimate from the post-colonial perspective to claim that the category of belonging has become highly intricate in light of the lack of cultural fixity and sense of rootedness in a hybrid society. However, one cannot turn a blind eye to the desire of individuals to belong only because the markers that have used to delineate categories of home and belonging have been complicated or even abolished in a hybridised world. In my view, the desire to belong is one of the central human themes of *White Teeth.* tThe question whether or how comic effects operate in the novel highlight this concern is crucial. In a similar fashion, Phillips claims that the comic mode does not cover the palpable suffering of wanting to belong in *White Teeth*: "There is nothing farcical about the pain of wanting to belong. In this respect, White Teeth is full of false smiles and contrived faces, masks that are repeatedly donned in order to better hide the pain" (Phillips n. pag.). The critic stresses the fact that Britain is a "mongrel nation" still irritated and alarmed by the fact that old markers of belonging have lost their validity. Therefore, Britain finds itself in a struggle of coming to terms with new ways of belonging (Phillips n. pag.). From the immigrant point of view, the pillars of home and belonging are left behind and erased as soon as immigrants enter new ground, as Tancke suggests. She points to the novel's implication of 'original trauma'; a state of immigrant turmoil caused by the loss of a firm ground one can call home:

> With its invocation of the idea of 'original trauma', [*White Teeth*] conceptualizes migration as an experience that constitutes a fundamental shattering of identity and a threat to selfhood. . . . . This stance permeates the novel, and the characters' experiences must be read as an effect of their 'original trauma' of not belonging, and being torn between conflicting origins and their respective demands and impulses. (Tancke n. pag.)

Tancke's point is crucial for my analysis: one can safely argue, that, in Tancke's terms, all intercultural conflicts, racial issues and identity struggles in *White Teeth* are caused by what the novel phrases as the 'original trauma' of not belonging but wanting to belong – a concern that has attracted not enough attention in post-colonial discourse. Molly Thompson adds that, due to this painful vacancy of home and familiarity, there is a literal "excess of belonging" (136) in the novel. According to Thompson, belonging in itself is an existential and thus deeply human desire; in a multicultural environment where no orientation is offered, this desire is aggravated and intensified (136). For post-colonial critics, hybridity and belonging are difficult, if not impossible to reconcile; novels of British migrant fiction get to the bottom of this painful subject. I would therefore argue that *White Teeth* comically explores how human beings are at pains to

bridge this existential gap between belonging and not belonging – and take it to the extremes.

Extremist behaviour and radical thinking are considered cardinal topics thematised in *White Teeth*. It is striking though that most critics (and those with post-colonial background in particular) tend to see Islamic fundamentalism portrayed in the novel as *the* extremist position to stick out in Britain's hybrid post-colonial environment.[74] In similar fashion, militant Islam is seen as a result of and direct response to the flip side of being a post-colonial subject in Britain, namely to the exposure to racism and discrimination. This logic even leads to the speculation to what extent racism and fundamentalism cause and condition each other. Several critics make explicit comments on this issue: according to Gunning, teenage disposition to Islamic violence is a counter-strategy "against lived oppression" of racism and violence, thus exceeding simple adolescent rebellion against conformism of the parent generation (132); Meinig claims that Islamic fundamentalism and other extremist positions stem from and are caused by colonial violence and its aftermath, as post-colonial subjects still suffer under the continuation of violent neo-colonial brutality and the feeling of displacement in the present-day post-colonial society (251); and finally, Mirze draws a direct line between racist prejudice and Islamism and fundamentalism as its outcome: "What better way to irritate the nationalists than by acting out as radical Muslim? What better way to solve an identity crisis than by adopting the ready-made one his opponents are constantly trying to impose on [an individual]?" (197) As these statements show, fundamentalist behaviour in *White Teeth* (in this case Islamic terrorism) is considered a logical step following and countering racist discrimination.

In my view, these critical derivations run the risk of simplifying several aspects *White Teeth* wants to communicate to its readers: it lays bare a pluralist society in which manifold extremist positions are omnipresent; it dismisses dogmatic thinking while simultaneously exploring and understanding human motives behind cultural, religious or political radicalism; and finally, it accomplishes this multiple task with the help of a range of comic effects. My argument is based upon statements made by critical forerunners who have approached *White Teeth* with the attempt to give justice to a whole spectrum of positions the novel offers on extremism. Matthew Paproth, for instance, argues that the novel's characters are caught in a restless quest for

[74] Ramsey-Kurz (2005); Meinig (2004); Mirze (2008); Gunning (2011).

meaning, truth and happiness in a chaotic world where extreme binaries seem to be the only (and impossible) way out (9). Paproth adds that

> we see Smith rejecting absolutes, 'the fundamentals,' … as she picks apart traditional understandings of the world by poking holes in language, religion, culture, history, and other structures through which people typically give meaning to their lives. (Paproth 10)

Similarly, Roy Sommer states that the novel reduces dogmatic concepts of mono-culturalism and pure authenticity to absurdity; hermetically sealed mindsets are ironically unmasked as "projections of discontented individuals" (Sommer 182, my translation). The novel poses the following question: what is this world that makes individuals discontent and engaged in a compulsive striving for meaning? McLeod argues that it is an environment that inflicts upon individuals the feeling of being 'different'; according to McLeod, the novel explores the "pain of being 'different' in London, and the dangerous consequences this may create" ("Revisiting Postcolonial London" 42). I expand McLeod's suggestion by claiming that such an environment can make one feel different and alienated in more than just one way; in fact, in a fast, ever-changing and hard-to-grasp world of cultural fusion, everyone is at pains to lessen their irritation by joining a club that will 'make it simple' and give their world a meaning. Tew is quite correct to observe that in their quest for meaning and simplicity

> all of Smith's characters draw upon the ideas of others, but not emphatically, rather often literally taking the written word at face value as fact, or as a version of history, or a kind of inviolable religious statement. Hence the various fundamentalisms are scarcely debated, simply becoming a matter for outrage or rejection.[75] (Tew 63)

Echoing Tew's conclusion, I will approach *White Teeth* under the premise that falling back on fundamentalism and extremist ideology is a trait that sooner or later comes to the surface in every character and is comically exposed as a human potential. I also agree with many of the aforementioned statements that the novel rejects dogmatic and simplistic explanations of the world, which is an agenda poignantly pursued with the help of ironic and satirical impulses in the text. What is more, *White Teeth* goes beyond the post-colonial explanation of fundamentalist thinking as an answer to post-colonial oppression; it diversifies the many irritations humans in contemporary society are at

[75] Tew tends to exclude the white, intellectual and liberal Chalfen family, but as my analysis of comic effects will show, even their family members are prone to exclusivist thinking and dogmatic world-views.

pains to handle and reduce through radical thinking. Certainly one can speak of a general "sense of unbelonging" and alienation (Tancke n. pag.) lurking in every character of the novel. However, I find it crucial to get to the bottom of these radical mindsets or, in Zadie Smith's words, to explore "the human element" behind oversimplified and radical solutions in *White Teeth* (qtd. in "Interview with Zadie Smith"). In her analysis of "the painful underbelly" (Tancke n. pag.) creeping under the comic surface of the novel, Tancke detects what she refers to as "a set of uncomfortable truths", namely a variety of conflicts, struggles and things humans cannot escape that cause the pain of 'unbelonging', an agony and lack of sense in the world and self that in turn begs for radical solutions. Some of the novel's examples in Tancke's analysis point to feelings of voice- and helplessness, an anger that is hard to place, futile human attempts to erase roots and history in their lives, exposure to what is "intrinsic to human affairs", and the alienation from one's own body due to beauty ideals (Tancke n. pag.). These are only some of the motivations and impulses that we share as humans but that readers tend to ignore, as Tancke suggests. From this perspective, it is legitimate to argue that *White Teeth* is a novel committed to discovery and thematization of human condition, namely the tendency to fall prey to easy and radical solutions as coping mechanisms to a sense of alienation and unbelonging we all share in various ways (Tancke n. pag.). One of the objectives of my analysis is to illustrate how the novel's comic impulses serve this indeed humanist agenda of the novel.

Unlike in post-colonial discourse, where wanting to belong is a complex issue for hybrid individuals between cultures that have lost their demarcations and authority for authenticity, *White Teeth* focuses on lack of belonging and wanting to belong as a human trait, an all-encompassing human conflict that aggravates the lives of all humans in societies that are becoming more and more complex. Belonging is a human neurosis complicated by the complexities of the world, out of which plurality of cultures and hybridity is only one reason to feel displaced. Molly Thompson is right when she argues that in *White Teeth*, "inhabiting a multicultural society is not easy for *anyone*, and that we are all implicated by an 'excess of belonging' due to the fact that (whether we want to believe it or not) our history, corporeality and nationality are constant in flux" (Thompson 136). Nicola Allen describes the novel as a world inhabited by misfits: characters who fail to fit in and find their place in the world (85). What is more important, Allen does not differentiate between the immigrant conflicts of Samad Iqbal, Archie's midlife crisis that leads to a suicide attempt, the social isolation of the

Chalfens and Irie's struggle with a body that does not feel like hers (N. Allen 85). In my analysis, I follow suit by stating that unbelonging is a universal human affair, a pain shared by all characters in the novel. What is more, the reasons for this alienation from the world are manifold (as opposed to the post-colonial stance that hybridity or exposure to racism and discrimination are the only causes).

As pointed out in the previous section on hybridity, it is an utterly precarious state of identity that, instead of being a strategy for coming to terms with cultural plurality, causes a condition of complete disorientation. Millat is one of the prime examples in the novel for the human irritation of unbelonging caused by a hybrid identity:

> He [Millat] was simply too big to remain merely the object of Irie's affection, leader of the Raggastanis, or the son of Samad and Alsana Iqbal. He had to please all of the people all of the time. To the cockney wide-boys in the white jeans and the coloured shirts, he was the joker, the risk-taker, respected lady-killer. To the black kids he was fellow weed-smoker and valued customer. To the Asian kids, hero and spokesman. Social chameleon. And underneath it all, there remained an ever present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere. (*WT* 269)

The narrator uncovers the conflicted side of Millat's hybrid adaptability: by constantly transforming his identity, Millat is able to please the demands of virtually all groups, yet he loses himself in the process. The result is a hybrid character that easily slips in and out of context *and*, as the narrator concludes in a serious manner, an angry and vulnerable human being out of touch with a place to call home. One of the novel's crucial criticisms at hybridity is the narrative exposure of the irony of 'belonging everywhere' that this practice implies; in *White Teeth*, 'belonging everywhere' equates 'belonging nowhere', a painful itch that distresses 'social chameleons' such as Millat. For the young Iqbal, hybridity is an ability to live up to the multiple expectations of others, and yet Millat will never meet the expectations of his father Samad. Millat's mix of cultures and languages "modulated wildly between the rounded tones of the Chalfens and the street talk of the KEVIN clan" (*WT* 351) tears a generational and cultural rift between him and his father Samad who is wildly enraged by Millat's cultural indetermination. Ironically enough, Millat is equally irritated by the inconsistent lifestyle of his father, who fails to pave a path of orientation for Millat: "He's a bloody hypocrite, man, … he prays five times a day but he still drinks and he doesn't have any Muslim friends, then he has a go at me for fucking a white girl" (*WT* 334). Samad lacks the features of a fatherly idol figure in many ways; Millat realizes with bitter sarcasm

that his crippled immigrant father is a far cry from an idol one can worship and follow his footsteps: "All his life he wanted a Godfather, and all he got was Samad. A faulty, broken, stupid, one-handed waiter of a man who had spent eighteen years in a strange land" (*WT* 506). The discrepancy between what Millat wanted and what he got is blatantly exposed: Samad fails to embody a god-like father figure, a reason for Millat to literally turn to other God-like fathers, his new Hollywood mafia family of powerful and fatherly godfathers as a compensation: "Here was where Millat really learnt about fathers. Godfathers, blood-brothers, pacinodeniros, men in black who looked good, who talked fast, who never waited a (mutherfuckin') table, who had two, fully functioning, gun-toting hands" (*WT* 217). Once more the text evokes the contrast between Hollywood's vigorous and fatherly power and authority and Samad's weakness and physical degeneration, Millat's two irreconcilable poles between wishful thinking and painful reality. Although in a satirical manner that makes easy conclusions a challenging undertaking, the narrator describes how Millat's affection for KEVIN, a clan-like militant Muslim group, derives from another traumatic experience, namely the separation from his twin brother Magid at an early age:

> Marjorie the analyst had suggested that this desire to be part of a clan was a result of being, effectively, half a twin. Marjorie the analyst suggested that Millat's religious conversion was more likely born out of a need for sameness within a group than out of any intellectually formulated belief in the existence of an all-powerful creator. (*WT* 442)

As an insight into Millat's reasoning, this passage represents a satirical comment on simplistic explanations about the origin of Millat's unbelonging epitomised by 'Marjorie the analyst' and her cause-and-effect diagnosis. Apart from being half a twin, Millat is also portrayed as chronically angry, but the textual hints about the root of his anger are more than ambiguous. While critics such as Allen and Head see a direct co-relation between Millat's marginality as an immigrant child and his Islamic radicalism as a response (N. Allen 87; Head 113), Tancke sees Millat's anger as more "diffuse" with a sense of alienation that he cannot put his finger on (Tancke n. pag.). The following passage from *White Teeth* confirms Tancke's conclusion:

> He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a film-maker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; . . . . that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country, until

> the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands. (*WT* 234)

If one can speak of comic effects in this tirade, then it is the passage's sharp and aggressive accumulation of immigrant stereotypes with which Millat is identified; otherwise, Millat is entirely absent as a human being with feelings, personality or sexuality. Millat reaches for anger as counter-activism against his voicelessness, but only because he saw it work on TV and in the media and, as the text points out, 'thought it recognized him'. It may indeed be too simplistic to draw a direct line between racism and radical Islam as a response, as the narrator expands on the nature of Millat's anger: "[It was not] the righteous anger of a man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster, a juvenile delinquent, determined to prove himself, determined to run the clan, determined to beat the rest" (*WT* 446 f). Millat anger is 'hybrid' and multi-faceted: Millat is angry at his father, angry at his twin brother, angry at a society's ignorance of him and angry at his own insignificance. As so many other characters in this novel, Millat reaches for easy solutions that result in a rigid idea of how the world should be, thus ironically ignoring that the complexity of his anger and feeling of displacement will never be satisfied but only complicated by these simplified solutions. For instance, KEVIN's leaflets entirely complicate Millat's relationships with women, a domain he was at ease with (*WT* 370), while their demand to "purge oneself of the taint of the West" (*WT* 444) completely collides with his passion for Hollywood mafia movies. In a comic novel full of tragic characters, Millat's example is illustrative of one of the crucial human ironies: searching for easy solutions to come to terms with a complex world.

As Millat, his father Samad is likewise caught in this human treadmill of unbelonging and compensation of this pain via dogmas that aggravate the situation. Samad's profound discontentment with himself and the world has a complex genesis (Tew 49); the narrator contours Samad's struggles both with clamant cartoonishness and with more sober and reflective tones. For a start, the novel introduces the reader to what appears a striking synopsis of Samad's fate of unbelonging, an inscription on a non-existing, but deeply felt imaginary placard that Samad carries around:

> 'I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER, MY WIFE IS CALLED ALSANA, WE LIVE IN EAST LONDON BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO MOVE NORTH. I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH,

> I'M NOT SURE. I HAVE A FRIEND - ARCHIE - AND OTHERS. I AM FORTY-NINE BUT WOMEN STILL TURN IN THE STREET, SOMETIMES.' (*WT* 58)

There is a tragicomic incongruity between Samad's insignificance and disappointment hidden in the content and the proclamative nature of the capital letters reflecting Samad's desperate desire to tell the world about himself. Samad seems to have failed colossally at being a student, scholar and serviceman; he is unluckily married to the much younger and rather exhausting Alsana; he hardly makes a living and lives in a poor neighbourhood; he has lost his faith and, he wants to feel sexually desired. Samad's sons offer no relief: Magid has become "a pukka Englishman, white suited, silly wig lawyer" and Millat a "fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist" (*WT* 407). What is more, Samad is excruciated by a strange immigrant paradox: he has made the "devil's pact" with England, a hostile country ("Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers" (*WT* 407)) that has dragged him in and changed him to the point of no return. While the narrative voice counters Samad's somewhat melodramatic approach to his own destiny, it allows for undertones of bitterness and disappointment (Squires 39). Samad is painfully aware of his inner fragmentation, a fact that he spells out in moments free of comic impulses:

> I am having difficulties myself – we are all having difficulties in this country, this country which is new to us and old to us at the same time. We are divided people, aren't we. . . . . We are split people. For myself, half of me wishes to sit quietly with my legs crossed, letting the things that are beyond my control wash over me. But the other half wants to fight the holy war. Jihad! (*WT* 179)

In an all-inclusive and indeed humanist manner, Samad postulates that 'we' – that is, we humans – all face the anguish of feeling separated from the world and ourselves, which is in accord with the overall agenda of the novel to explore the anxieties of human nature. Samad then turns to his 'personal' split, a specific manifestation of this general feeling of unbelonging. More than anything, Samad wants to put his stamp on the world, which is why he develops obsessive strategies to do so. Needless to say that with these strategies, Samad only digs bigger holes for himself: he is obsessed with the allegedly neglected historical impact of Mangal Pande, his ancestor and rebel against the colonial regime, but due to his crippled arm, Samad cannot follow suit and become a war hero. His fast and feverish affair with Poppy Burt-Jones, a white woman, ends in frustration and even greater conflict in his relationship with Allah. In an outrageous attempt to redeem himself and worship at least one of his

sons as a 'proper' Muslim, Samad deports one of his twins, Magid, to Bangladesh, thus causing even a greater rift between him and his wife and his sons respectively. All the while, Samad is haunted by Allah and his punishments for the deals that he makes with his Creator: he tries to purify sexual desire for women with masturbation, only to give up masturbation for alcohol (*WT* 139). The narrator ruthlessly mocks the implications and consequence of Samad's covenant with Allah:

> [O]f course he was in the wrong religion for compromises, deals, pacts, weaknesses and *can't say fairer than that's*. He was supporting the wrong team if it was empathy and concessions he wanted, if he wanted liberal exegesis, if he wanted to be given a break. His God was *not* like that charming white-bearded bungler of the Anglican, Methodist or Catholic churches. His God was not in the business of *giving people breaks*. (*WT* 140, emphasis in general)

In his struggle to comply with Allah's demands, Samad develops a religious paranoia blatantly mocked by the narrative voice. The ideology of traditional Islam he has committed himself is compared to a team that does not negotiate its tactics; the God to which Samad has subjected himself is an adamant judge of sinful activities. With comic dismissal of extreme mindsets such as traditionalist Islam, the narrator also mocks Samad for falling prey to such a dogmatic worldview under which he constantly flounders under bad deals and worse conscience. As his son Millat, Samad is prone to easy solutions to all his problems and desires and is equally overrun by dogma in his struggle to belong, be an upright character, and make a difference.

Irie Jones, the daughter of a Jamaican and an Englishman, also finds herself in a turmoil fuelled by several disasters that contribute to her sense of unbelonging. Irie's sorrows stem from the painful detachment from her own body that she feels she cannot inhabit or call home. The teenager has inherited the curvaceous body from her Jamaican family line and yet finds herself in England, a place where her physical constitution is at odds with predominantly 'white' beauty ideals. Also, Irie undergoes the inherently difficult period of "[p]uberty, real full-blown puberty":

> Irie believed she had been dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buck teeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair, and to top it off mole-ish eyesight which in turn required bottle-top spectacles in a light shade of pink. . . . . And this belief in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*, had subdued her; she kept her smart-ass comments to herself these days, she kept her right hand on her stomach. She was all *wrong*. *(WT* 268, emphasis in the original)

Irie's caricature-like features in this passage reflect her own dismissal of her body: everything is exaggerated and impossibly out of shape – as pubescent bodies usually

are. Not only does Irie's body seem out of proportion, it is furthermore at odds with its environment: England is a place where Irie's outer appearance literally remains unnoticed, "a country that offers few images with which to identify and where 'white' ideals of beauty dominate" (Thompson 128). Irie, however, cannot escape the physical inscription of her Jamaican roots (Tancke n. pag.), nor can she escape the judgement of her surroundings. When Irie suggests that blackness might be a beauty ideal in a Shakespearean sonnet at school, she is firmly shushed by her teacher and the laughter of her class (*WT* 272). Nothing in her environment offers a niche where Irie can feel at home with herself. To crown Irie's misery, Millat rejects her because he prefers slim blondes and needs "to be cool" (*WT* 269). Just like all the other characters, Irie takes drastic action in order to ease her pain, feel more like herself and attract Millat. Apart from unbearable corsetry to constrain her curves (*WT* 266), Irie literally tortures herself to smooth her Afro in a beauty saloon, upon which she demolishes her hair down to its roots (*WT* 276 ff). As Tancke suggests, Irie compensates her alienation with radical measures and aggressiveness not against others, but against herself (Tancke n.pag). The novel questions Irie's painful beautification: as she wants to impress Millat, Irie provokes Neena's laughter and mockery:

> Irie walked into the lounge. 'Bloody hell!' screeched Neena at the approaching vision. 'What the fuck do you look like!' She looked beautiful. She looked straight, un-kinky. Beautiful. 'You look like a freak! Fuck me! Maxine, man, check this out. Jesus Christ, Irie. What exactly were you aiming for?' Wasn't it obvious? Straight. Straightness. Flickability. 'I mean, what was the grand plan? The Negro Meryl Streep?' Neena folded over like a duvet and laughed herself silly. (*WT* 283)

The comedy of the situation is heightened as the narrative voice slips into Irie's view and counters it blatantly with Neena's derisive commentaries. These contrasting perspectives elucidate another aspect, namely Irie's blindness to the catastrophic outcome of the situation (she had lost her Afro and was wearing Indian 'dead straight' hair (*WT* 280)) and the dubiousness of her endeavours to eradicate her own physical self.

Irie's rejected love for Millat and her irreconcilability with her physical body are accompanied by family conflicts; at one point, Irie is literally escaping one place for another, moving back and forth from her parents' house to her grandmother's house to the Chalfen household. Naturally, all these locations are loaded with even more conflict, as the narrator observes with a note of sarcastic bitterness: "She was

never home. Irie was stuck between a rock and a hard place, like Ireland, like Israel, like India. A no-win situation" (*WT* 425 f). Her attempts to absorb the white-middle-class aura of the Chalfens, to have their intellectuality and superiority also fails as she overhears Marcus Chalfen's statement that she will never be a brilliant scientist, only a decent dentist (*WT* 368). With an alienating body, pain of homelessness, and Jamaica and England clashing in her identity, Irie Jones develops a utopian notion of homeliness void of roots, myths and ideological thinking:

> No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs – this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into the language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningest of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page. (*WT* 402, emphasis in the original)

The reader is offered an image of paradisian purity as Irie indulges herself in a world bereft of any markers of ethnicity, race, nation: a world that is Edenic and, as its imagery insinuates, surreal at the same time. The narrative voice amplifies the fantastic nature of Irie's mystical homeland with notions that are equally difficult to grasp such as 'infinity' or – with a smirk – 'unicorn'. Irie longs for an age of innocence, but the narrator uncovers a human paradox: humans spin 'fictions, myths, lies and tangled webs' *because* they want to feel at home. In other words, the human desire for home and belonging leads to an anxiety that is satisfied with easy and clear-cut solutions, a tactics that in the end only aggravates human sense of unbelonging. Irie's myth-like site of belonging appears a blank utopia in which roots cease to matter; and yet, the utopian quality of Irie's vision is similarly radical as the strategies of belonging employed by other characters in the novel. What the mythological images in the passage above insinuate is the lack of reality in Irie's wishful thinking; they highlight the ironic and irreconcilable contrast between Irie's 'airy' and rootless world and the fact that humans create or need roots in order to belong. Regardless of how much she attempts to eradicate the markers of her body and envision a paradise in which all demarcations of identity become meaningless, Irie cannot escape her roots and the physical condition given to her by her genetic make-up: "… Irie's Caribbean roots, which her shape points to, are … irremovable, beyond the scope of individual self-fashioning" (Tancke n. pag.). In other words, roots *do* matter in *White Teeth*; as Sigrun Meinig suggests, Irie's utopian dream of a neutral (home-) land is exposed as problematic (248), as is her radical approach to

'neutralize' aspects of her outer appearance that point to her African-Jamaican roots.

Irie's delusion of a rootless world is as radical (and thus critical) as all the world-views and mindsets that the other characters in the novel put on display. *White Teeth* tackles the issue of belonging as a goal that is only achievable with the help of extreme and simplified solutions; in one word, fundamentalisms. The terms 'fundamental' and 'fundamentalism' are so central to the novel, that the novel supplies the reader with Oxford dictionary entries and definitions of these terms (*WT* 413). In doing so, *White Teeth* sets its own axioms about what is 'fundamental' to the understanding of the plot and its characters. What is more, the lexical objectivity and the serious nature behind the dictionary definitions is followed and cracked by the sentimentality of a love song underneath, in which "The fundamental things apply, / As time goes by" (*WT* 413). While the lyrics accentuate the fundamental things about love (kisses and sighs), they are in fact a prelude to a downright battle between fundamentalist mindsets in the chapters to follow. At the close of the millennium, virtually all characters bow to orthodoxies, easy solutions and rigid thinking (Tew 63) or, as the novel defines it, to the "strict maintenance of traditional orthodox religious beliefs or doctrines; *esp*. belief in the inerrancy of religious texts" (*WT* 413). *White Teeth*'s portrayals of radical thinking are saturated with religious imagery and religious practice. Their followers are disciples worshipping their mentors, readers of scripture and leaflets, missionaries, prophets that preach and believers that take action; above all, all the characters in the novel are entirely convinced of the infallibility of their ideas. The novel's narrative voice debunks the wrongness of fundamentalist assumptions while at the same time ridiculing the characters as easy pray of simplistic doctrines.

KEVIN, or *The Keepers of the Victorious Islamic Nation*, is a militant Muslim group with an evident "acronym problem" (*WT* 295).[76] While critics such as McLeod argue that "the bathetic acronym of KEVIN pretty much evacuates any sobering

[76] After 9/11 and the events of 7/7, the comic tone of the narrative voice in combination with radical dogma and the outburst of terrorist violence has raised more than one eyebrow: critics were urged to revisit and seriously challenge the alleged comic carelessness of *White Teeth*'s portrayal of Millat and KEVIN. Helga Ramsey-Kurz notes that the events of 9/11 have "significantly transformed western perceptions of political dissent and opposition, and effectively eroded the acceptability of the discursive practice of making light of political radicalism and religious fundamentalism" (Ramsey-Kurz 74). The shock after 9/11 would have choked the public enthusiasm for the novel, if not prevented its publication altogether (Ramsey-Kurz 74). In the light of the terrorist attacks on London's public transport system on July 7 in 2005 (now know as 7/7), Susie Thomas seriously questions the comic tone underlying the narrative depiction of Millat and KEVIN by stating it is 'too careless' to capture the dangerousness of terrorism and militant Islam ("Zadie Smith's False Teeth").

gravitas attaching itself to Millat's new group of friends" ("Revisiting Postcolonial London" 42), it represents a degeneration of a pompous name and message into its short-sighted, foolish essence. The group's flamboyant rhetoric promoted by catchy leaflets ('*Who is truly free? The Sisters of KEVIN or the Sisters of Soho?*') is debunked as hot air and lacking any explanatory power. KEVIN's preachers are portrayed as short, dull, and unimpressive; their message feeds on megalomaniac rhetoric and tautology (*WT* 468). KEVIN's members such as Shiva or Mo the butcher are exposed as self-absorbed individuals with little apprehension of the group's cause as they are obsessed with their own interests: Shiva is now "getting more pussy than he ever had as a kaffir" (*WT* 502) and Mo wants KEVIN to give easy answers his questions about the Western world (*WT* 473 f). In *White Teeth*, KEVIN is reduced to an absurdity that characters reach for to compensate their deficiencies, but so is another acronym group, FATE. Apart from the catchy acronym policy (FATE standing for 'Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation'), both groups spread their word via bold and simplistic leaflets and both are, as the narrator assures us, 'dedicated to action' (*WT* 403). The animal rights activism of the group, however, is considered a personal playground of Crispin, its leader: FATE is "all designed for the greater glory of Crispin. Crispin gets to do a bit of shouting, Crispin gets to do some waving-of-gun, Crispin does some pseudo-Jack Nicholson-psycho twitches just for the drama of it" (*WT* 524). FATE is a bizarre and comical haven for Joshua Chalfen, a teenager frustrated by his father's negligence and easily 'converted' to FATE by the sex-appeal of one of its members, Joely (*WT* 481). As with KEVIN, FATE's insubstantial yet radical agenda is a cover-up for individuals in search of simple and radical messages.

Joshua Chalfen also replaces one orthodoxy with another; the teenager joins FATE in order to erase his family's ideology of Chalfenism. The Chalfens are a caricature-like portrait of a white intellectual middle-class family with an affinity for genetics and left-wing liberal attitudes. All Chalfens consider themselves "mentally healthy and emotionally stable" due to massive therapy (*WT* 313); they glorify their intelligence, superiority and the 'good genes' behind this disposition with cult-like mantras such as '*It's the Chalfen way*' (*WT* 314, emphasis in the original). As every other doctrine in the novel, Chalfenism depends on recruits that will admire its core beliefs and preach to non-believers. As the narrative voice sarcastically states, the perfection of Chalfenism has led to its isolation with the Chalfens "like wild-eyed

passengers of *The Mayflower* with no rock in sight. Pilgrims and prophets with no strange land" (*WT* 315). Chalfenism has one brilliant convert: Magid Iqbal, the disciple of the genetic scientist Marcus Chalfen, who has given up on his first-born son Joshua as he is not 'Chalfenist' enough (*WT* 421). As expected, Magid becomes a missionary of Chalfenism; the narrative portrayal of Magid's agenda is saturated with cross-references to religious concepts such preaching and prophecy: "All Magid wanted to do … was bring Chalfenism to the people" *(WT* 427). It is once more Neena who realizes that in his obsession with Chalfenism, Magid has detached himself from the world and has become a ridiculous figure in the process: "[L]ike all manifestations of the Second Coming, all saints, saviours and gurus, Magid Iqbal was …, in Neena's eloquent words, a first-class, one hundred per cent, bona fide, total and utter *pain in the arse*" (*WT* 427 f, emphasis in the original). Magid is indoctrinated with the logical thinking of Chalfenism to the extent that a 'shrink-to-fit' jeans becomes a source of irritation: the jeans incident is turned into slapstick comedy as Magid sits in a bath with the jeans on in order to check the 'shrink-to-fit' theory (*WT* 428 ff). Consequently, Magid's affiliation with Chalfenism is another manifestation of radical thinking combined with absolute inerrancy and insufficient in capturing and explaining the world in order to domesticate it. As with the Chalfens, Magid's Chalfenism has lead to scientific zeal compared to religious fantacisim but also to an entire detachment from the logics of the daily routine.

Unlike Magid, Hortense Bowden considers the daily routine a necessary prelude to the end of the word for which she obsessively prepares herself with an arsenal of religious phrases and practices. While Magid is consumed with the exploration of the logic, Hortense already has an answer to every quotidian idiosyncracy, provided by the scripture of Jehovah's Witnesses and leaflets such as 'Will the Lord Forgive the Onanist?' (*WT* 33) Hortense understands the world as a literal replica of the Witnesses' Revelation; her attempts to do literal justice to the demands of the scripture subvert her daily life into a religious farce. Temperature, for instance, is an indicator for the nature of God and the Devil: while hot and ice-cold are considered divine properties, luke-warm is devilish in itself. Consequently, Hortense literally burns her food and keeps buckets of ice to cool off her drinking water (*WT* 396). With her entire existence on hold for the end of the world, Hortense is bitterly disappointed at the alleged mistakes in the calculation of the date of the apocalypse, as she has been

> waiting for 'those neighbours, those who failed to listen to your warnings, to sink under a hot and terrible fire that shall separate their skin from their bones, shall melt the eyes in their socket, and burn the babies that suckle at their mothers' breasts … so many of your neighbours shall die that day that their bodies, if lined up side by side, will stretch three hundred times round the earth and on their charred remains shall the true Witnesses of the Lord walk to his side. – *The Clarion Bell*, issue 245' (*WT* 32 f, emphasis in the original)

The horrendous and exaggerated invocations of the apocalypse point to a hidden agenda of the Witnesses, namely their self-righteousness that has supposed to be confirmed on global scale at the end of the world. Even more, the sufferings of others are considered a revenge for their scepticism at Jehovah's teachings. However, the flamboyant message of cosmic dimensions is crushed by the fact that the world has simply continued to exist.

Hortense's Bowdenism combined with the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses is debunked as a religious treadmill with Hortense Bowden as its cartoonish puppet. Not only are Hortense's daily preparations in vain, her second agenda to educate herself by religious teachings is prevented by her co-believer Ryan Topps, who helps out in her household. As soon as Hortense makes one autonomous statement on the teachings of Jehovah, she is cut short by her own convert Ryan, who belongs to the council of King's Hall and is therefore in charge of the right and only interpretation of the scripture (*WT* 389). Behind Ryan's corrections lies an ironic break of Hortense's ambitions as a believer in Jehovah: Hortense has become a Jehovah's Witness for the sake of her own empowerment towards an autonomous being immune to pretensions of others to 'heducate' her and tell her what to do: "[I]f I were one of de hundred an' fourty-four, no one gwan try to heducate *me*. Dat would be *my* job! I'd make my own laws an' I wouldn't be wanting anybody else's opinions" (*WT* 409, emphasis in the original). But instead of more autonomy, Hortense finds herself on Ryan Topps' drip-feed of information and interpretation how to handle life and when to prepare for its ending.

As Hortense, Ryan Topps represents an emblem of human predisposition to dogma and the human obstinacy to hold it against its unbelievers. In a passage that could easily be the 'fundamental(-ist)' mantra of all the characters, Ryan's passions and motivations to stay and become Witness are unmasked:

> The right to be a pilgrim! Who does no presume and yet inherits the earth! The right to be right, to teach others, to be just at all times because God has ordained that you will be, the right to go into strange lands and alien places

> and talk to the ignorant, confident that you speak nothing but the truth. The right to be always *right*. So much better than the rights [Ryan] once held dear: the right to liberty, freedom of expression, sexual freedom, the right to smoke pot, the right to party, the right to ride a scooter sixty-five miles an hour on a main road without a helmet. So much more than all those, Ryan could claim. He exercised a right so rare, at this fag-end of the century, as to be practically obsolete. The most fundamental right of all. The right to be the good guy. (*WT* 510, emphasis in the original)

Ryan's inner thoughts reveal that, in a sense, the fundamentalisms in *White Teeth* are plans of action how to create order out of the worldly chaos and make oneself at home *and* how to hold that particular world order as the absolute and apodictic truth. The novel lays bare a human microcosm inhabited by humans who all, without exception, pursue precisely *that*: the self-righteousness of holding a simple truth that is not only the right answer for their own unbelonging and deficiencies but a universally valid truth. All characters prefer the fundamental 'right to be the good guy' to re-negotiation of their position: one may even argue that the affection for easy and absolute truths weighs more than daily joys and freedoms of, from Ryan's perspective, 'the right to party' and 'the right to ride a scooter sixty-five miles an hour on a main road without a helmet', freedoms that are willingly subjected to some allegedly cosmic laws.

The human irony (and tragedy) in *White Teeth* lies in the fact that the absolutisms to which the protagonists have committed themselves are portrayed as simplicisms too flawed and insufficient to heal the human condition of unbelonging and alienation from an ever-changing complex world. All characters are at pains to reconcile simple dogma with complicated reality, an undertaking in which they all blatantly fail. If *White Teeth* had a slogan capturing the essence of human experience, it would be 'how to belong in an easy way'; however, the novel is at pains to point out that there are no cosmic truths and recipes for belonging.

3.5 Conclusion: Reading *White Teeth* with a Humanist Approach

Pain, hostility against others, feelings of insignificance: those are only some of the human disasters responsible for the human crisis of unbelonging in *White Teeth*. And yet, the novel's insight into human tragedies is not easily obtainable. Quite the contrary, the overmastering comic tone of the novel has urged critics such as James Wood to question whether *White Teeth* is inhabited by cartoon-like caricatures or 'real' human characters at all.

Certainly, Wood has been the key figure in this debate on the humanness in *White Teeth*. According to Wood, Smith's novel belongs to a genre of novels "obviously very busy at the business of being comic" ("Introduction" 3). For Wood, Smith "is a frustrating writer … willing to let passages of her book descend into cartoonishness and a kind of itchy, restless extremism" ("Human, All Too Inhuman" 44). Wood sees this narrative practice as a trait of 'hysterical realism', a style of writing in which a flamboyant narrative entity borrows from realism and exaggerates it; needless to say that this exaggerated realism offers no space to tragedy or agony ("Hysterical Realism" 168). Wood makes no secret of his dismissal in pointing to what he considers a damaging effect of the novel's hysterical tone: its characters are exposed to utmost buffoonery and excess of wondrous and exaggerated stories to the extent that they are simply not believable as humans – they are literally "*in*human" ("Hysterical Realism" 169 f, emphasis in the original). In short, Wood's major critique is that hysterical realist novels carry facts and events to comic excess, but do not "know a single human being" (Brooker 1).

As my analysis of multiculturalism, racism, hybridity and belonging has shown, the comic tone of the narrative in *White Teeth* is not an end in itself, it is a strategy with which the novel explores the human nature behind these (mostly post-colonial) catchwords and concepts. The comic impulses in the narrative are many, and striking; and yet, as Isabel Ermida reminds us, the comic way a story is told should not be confused with its content (114). In other words, if we took the comic nature of the text as indicative of the overall agenda of the novel, James Wood's 'hysterical realism' would come to its fruition: *White Teeth* is brimming with satire, irony, cartoonish scenes and, at first sight, cartoon-like characters. However, the comic manoeuvres are an effective means to tell a story very much in discord with its comic narration. Jakubiak points out that, "[s]tudied *without* the comic elements that cushion the effect of disturbing messages, the events of the novel reveal themselves in their tragic rawness" (203, emphasis added). Similarly, Tew adds that the brutality of the plot's events is obscured by the comic impulses with which it is portrayed (53). In other words, *White Teeth* consists of a comic text and a disturbing story which both contribute to the novel's central point of concern.

Furthermore, the text allows for passages that are mildly comical, tragicomical with a note of compassion with the target under attack or lack humorous potential altogether. It is in these passages that the humanity and three-dimensionality of the

characters lurks through. Wood's analysis mainly focus on the flamboyant narrative voice of the omniscient narrator; a closer look at the narrative strategies, however, underneath reveals a more complex humour intertwined with seriousness and more complex protagonists that undergo a variety of traumas and perturbances.

The novel's comic excess unveils two discomforting observations: London's multicultural arena is occupied with racist, dubious and inconsistent subjects portrayed with striking parallels. London's inhabitants are a far cry from post-colonial hybrid subjects who abolish demarcations of race, culture and religion thus transforming Britain's definition as a nation. Instead, they discriminate against each other and turn their hybrid lifestyles into orthodoxies, thus degenerating post-colonial hybridity into a parade of mixed-and-matched yet dogmatic mindsets. In *White Teeth*, hybridity is not the answer to the complexities of the world; rather, it is itself a complexity that amounts to the human anxiety of unbelonging. Via comic effects, the novel uncovers a variety of human disasters that are not handled with hybrid practices of transformation, re-negotiation and dynamic change but with hybrid fundamentalisms. Despite the post-colonial proclamation that 'we are all hybrid now' (Head 2003), this post-colonial hybridity falls short in the light of another uncomfortable truth painfully uncovered in the novel: humans constantly find themselves in the unsettling state of detachment where they want to belong at any cost. For this very reason, all characters reach for simple visions and mindsets, world religions and personal '-isms' to give the world simple contours and reduce its complexity. The comic effects in *White Teeth* are instrumental in the novel's concern: they unmask, accentuate and point to this absurdity of the human condition.

On the other hand, one has to give credit to James Wood's observation that the comedic style dominates the plot. Sarcasm, derision and witty comments and remarks indeed permeate the story and complicate the act of reading and apprehension of the text's agenda. Tew states that this collision between the disturbing elements of the plot and its comic narration creates irritation in the reader's laughter (53). In addition to that, Tancke argues that the readers' expectations are unsettled in a comic and thus uncomfortable way: as readers mostly strive for entertainment and easy resolutions within a novel, their laughter is literally choked by the painful sub-layer of the narrative (Tancke n. pag.). *White Teeth* questions the act of reading itself: how can we read (and analyse) a story whose gravity collides with its comic narration? For a start, we can acknowledge our feeling of discomfort and our choking on our own laughter at the

realization of what we are actually laughing *at*. The challenge of reading *White Teeth* lies furthermore in forsaking one of the fundamental dispositions in the act of reading, namely the fact that "people tend to read into a text what they prefer or want to read" (Tancke n. pag.). If the dominant impression of a story is not the burdensome human struggle of its characters but the comic effects with which it is narrated, then the novel is reduced to mere entertainment or to its negative equivalent, 'hysterical realism As Jakubiak points out, Smith has adopted this controversial narrative practice of the comic combined with the serious as a test for the novel's readers: some will be distracted and entertained by the comedic nature of its narrative voice, and others will discover the human agony at the bottom of the story (217) – and even narrative seriousness. Under the premise that the comic text and the serious components are mutually dependent in contributing to the humanist agenda of the novel, I have taken both perspectives into account: with the help of its comic undertone, *White Teeth* uncovers and shakes its head at the troubles of the human condition.

IV Conclusion

To challenge 'old' mindsets and to navigate the reader towards new propositions is what Iser (1972) considers a crucial concern of prose fiction. The novels at hand are paradigmatic for this shift from past discourses towards new outlooks: Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* stand for British migrant fiction as a genre whose key agenda is to re-evaluate parameters of post-colonial readings and introduce new perspectives that move 'beyond the post-colonial'. Challenging the post-colonial is an intricate literary undertaking against what now has become a 'burden of post-colonial representation' for authors with hyphenated identities in Britain: their novels are expected to provide appropriate ambassadorship of the authors' ethnic origins, they are required to promote British minority politics and, above all, they are assumed to discuss and apply key post-colonial concepts on the textual and artistic level. In times of post-colonial prominence in the British academe and elsewhere, the artistic work of British-born writers with non-white or mixed-race backgrounds has been monopolised as a platform to demonstrate how post-colonial issues, key concepts and political implications are played out in the literary field. This tendency of critics also applies to the narrative strategies and aesthetical criteria these contemporary novels operate with.

Consequently, comic effects are interpreted as a post-colonial tactics of 'writing back' against issues that post-colonial critics and writers find objectionable: racism, neo-colonialism, myths of cultural purity and oppression of the non-white, marginalised post-colonial subject in Britain. In essence, this is a 'top-down' approach to comic effects in migrant fiction. Approaching a novel with post-colonial parameters and agendas predetermines (and limits) a reader's perspective on the comic potential this narrative has to offer. In fact, humour is a versatile tool: whether it functions as a testimony for sympathy, rebellion, dismissal, or understanding, they can only be detected on the textual level as the ground where comic incongruities step into action. The 'bottom-up' approach that I have adopted in this essay consists in disclosing the comic potential of a text to analyse how it supports the overall agenda of a novel. My examination of the comic effects on the textual level reveals that the novels at hand in fact criticize and in some cases overtly oppose core findings and ideas of the post-colonial theory. Instead, they promote new outlooks on typical post-colonial concerns or abandon the post-colonial domain altogether.

Many critics have seen the textual realization and treatment of racism in the novels under survey as evidence of post-colonial opposition against the xenophobia and intolerance of the white British mainstream visible on the textual level. Techniques such as caricaturist exaggeration and satirical exposure of white individuals, communities and the British society in general point to this anti-racist and thus clearly post-colonial agenda.

This is a valid, but also one-sided conclusion. The narratives under examination refrain from offering easy and unequivocal portrayals of racism, thereby disclosing greater dimensions of xenophobic bigotry. Comic effects eliminate clear-cut boundaries between racist perpetrators and victims of racism, and make unreserved sympathy with the victimization of the allegedly marginalised impossible. Racism as a phenomenon is detected, exposed and ridiculed in all the novels. However, their portrayals seem to point to yet deeper layers: despite the anti-racist agenda of the post-colonial discourse and the proclamation of multiculturalism as the banner under which the British society now sees its future, racism is ubiquitous. It pervades all segments of the British society portrayed in the novels: from infants and children to OAP's and veterans, from the lower-middle to middle class and intellectual bourgeoisie, and from the white British mainstream to, most significantly, minority communities. Under the comic veil of British migrant fiction lies a core idea incompatible with the post-colonial perspective: racism and intolerance of others are human – even though destructive – potentials immanent to every individual beyond their cultural, religious or political affiliations. Feelings of cultural or racial superiority and exclusion of others are not a domain reserved for the usual suspects from the post-colonial point of view, namely those in power and the cultural mainstream of white Britain. What *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and *White Teeth* demonstrate is that no human being is immune against racism.

One of the maxims of post-colonial fiction is to put forward representations of non-white ethnicity and represent marginalization as a means of stepping forward in favour of those ostracised by the dominant cultural discourse. British migrant fiction on the other hand, reflects about minority experience in a critical fashion expressed through the comic in its novels. Comic effects permeating portrayals of Asian or other non-English ethnicities are as unmissable as in portrayals of white characters, demonstrating that in the novels at hand, immigrants are not spared from scornful critique. While critics (e.g. Ranasinha 2007) welcome the fact that the novels at hand

offer unprecedented insights into immigrant or black experience, thus expanding the notion of what it means to be black or British-Asian, Syal's, Kureishi's, and Smith's portraits of ethnicity allow for both sympathetic and critical notes. *Anita and Me*, for instance, promotes the notion of critical belonging, a disposition of the child-narrator to both question and affiliate with her Indian heritage; *The Buddha of Suburbia* contains immigrant characters oozing stereotype ethnic humour and more sombre passages in which British-Asian characters appear human and vulnerable. Via comic effects both reconciliatory and aggressive in nature, British migrant fiction acknowledges the fact that immigrant characters are neither sympathetic nor particularly idealised; instead, they are as human, troubled and perplexed as their white counterparts.

Hybridity is another crucial idea of the post-colonial discourse under scrutiny in *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth*. The comic effects pervading narrative portrayals of hybrid identities point to a comic but also a critical treatment of their in-betweenness. Throughout all three novels, hybridity is mocked as a state of utmost confusion for the protagonists. Instead of celebrating their 'everyday hybridity' (Moss) as a highly powerful skill to transform their cultural environment and create new identities, all protagonists are trapped in a state of utmost irritation and confusion at a hybridised social fabric in which 'anything-goes' appears to be the highest maxim. Some characters readily embrace identity conceptions based on assimilation to the British mainstream or separatist traditionalism; others play with hybridity as a technique that will help them enforce new rigid frameworks of cultural orientation; and yet others take hybridity to the extremes as a method that will help them stand out among other hybrid individuals. What becomes evident is that the manifestations of hybridity in British migrant fiction oppose the post-colonial cheerful celebration of mixed identities and hybridity as an everyday phenomenon in multicultural Britain. Hybrid characters are disoriented rather than empowered in navigating their environment. On the one hand, the less culturally determined and self-aware they are, the more they are prone to extremist solutions; religion, specific cultural frames or affiliations with a particular political ideology, represent dubious havens from knowing oneself, learning about others and creating a dynamic and developing definition of a hybrid self and identity. Whether they are white British, mixed-race or non-British, all characters fall prey to ideological mindsets in the face of a new hybridised society and the hybridised

identities it has created. Dogmatic thinking is omnipresent, while cultural conventions determine what it means to be white, English, or Muslim, Jamaican or Pakistani. Self-awareness and self-reflection lose ground to rigid cultural practice. Dogma and simplicity provide rules and orientation in what seems to be an amorphous and arbitrary environment of a cultural 'anything-goes'. Instead of a growing recognition of the hybrid self and an individual sense of responsibility for one's own faults and potentials, simplistic ideologies offer justification for one's behaviour and the dismissal of others. All personal issues and deficiencies such as revenge, emancipation from others or sexual desires are placed within a higher dogmatic context and refer back to a divine authority or a set of rules that determine the lives of the protagonists.

On the other hand, hybridity carried to the extremes is dismissed to an equal extent as an identity practice that turns individuals into restless and selfish human beings. Desperate for individual significance in the light of hybrid indetermination, characters mimic, ape, adapt, and perform whatever culture, dogma and ideology they consider authentic or self-enriching. The more salient their lifestyles are, the more eccentric and grotesque these characters become. The fallout of this hybrid excess consists in alienation from others, inconsistency and hypocrisy and self-centeredness and ignorance of others.

What the novels furthermore show is that despite this alleged 'everyday hybridity' (Moss) proclaimed for Britain's modern society, hybrid individuals are nevertheless exposed to cultural prejudices and projections imposed upon them by other (hybrid) individuals who attempt to localize their origin and predict their lifestyle and worldviews. In the novels surveyed, all hybrid protagonists face compulsive influence by the society they inhabit to label and classify them as culturally determined. This cultural determination represents another potentially ironic incongruity between desirable conceptions and their everyday realization. Hybrid characters in the examples under survey mostly face judgment for what they are and prejudices about what they should be. What Syal, Kureishi and Smith powerfully display in their novels is that the mere existence and proclamation of a post-colonial concept such as hybridity has neither abolished the ubiquitous presence of racism nor the existence of essentialist labels, categories and cultural delineations. Their protagonists are all in fact hybrid and yet all prone to essentialist thinking. Their novels expose this disparity as an incongruity worthy of ridicule; they also lay

open the conspicuous difference between the human propensities of their characters and ideals post-colonial individuals are supposed to embody.

Anita and Me tackles this desire to belong and to feel familiar in contexts that offer safety, thus clearly dissociating from post-colonial priorities. The main protagonist Meena undergoes phases of assimilation and eventually turns to her Indian heritage. What Syal's novel emphasizes is the growing maturity of the child-narrator with which Meena is able to question and re-evaluate her desire to belong to both Anita's gang and to explore her parents' heritage and family. *Anita and Me* does not ignore or deny human fallbacks on predetermined cultural and social parameters in order to find home and orientation. However, the novel suggests that belonging and making oneself at home is possible with a reflective and critical approach towards the contexts with which one associates. The comic mode in *Anita and Me* reflects this oscillation between affiliation and critique: the narrative comically dissects the inconsistencies and downsides within both cultural contexts that Meena finds herself in. At the same time, the novel allows for more placid impulses that signal Meena's affinity.

The Buddha of Suburbia highlights the turmoils of a metropolitan London in which reportedly everything is possible in terms of lifestyle, culture and ideology, and in which his hybrid main protagonist Karim encounters a parade of characters engaged in constant transformations of themselves. Karim's world is brimming with humans who change their ways of life and thinking in a second; then they are zealous enough to fight tooth and nail for it only to replace it with another identity they find suitable for themselves. In this way, zeal and passion for a cause is followed by hypocrisy and abolition. Kureishi's multicultural London represents an arena of human inconsistencies and quick and unpredictable changes of the heart. With the help of cynical tones, the novel delivers no clear preferences of attitudes and lifestyles in this pluralistic environment. Instead, it opens up a universalist perspective that goes beyond the post-colonial agenda; the novel's focus is not on its protagonists' membership as representatives of a group or an ideology, but rather on humans who incessantly and selfishly strive after opportunities to stand out.

With the help of the comic, *White Teeth* raises serious issues that are put aside in multicultural millennial Britain: London's multicultural make-up is represented as a society where cultures and lifestyles are justifications for separatist thinking and exclusivist behaviour. Smith's novel focuses upon the shortcomings of dogmatic

thinking, exposing religious and political and cultural mindsets that cause trouble rather than offering orientation. Their followers chastise themselves, are lost in confusion and are constantly bewildered by the fact that the hybrid world they encounter is incompatible with the explanations their essentialist dogmas have to offer. Nevertheless, they fall prey to dogmatic thinking and are constantly engaged in trying to make sense of a complex world with limited means. *White Teeth* refrains from utopic notions of a multicultural Britain and a new era of tolerance and pluralistic lifestyles. Instead, the novel points to the painful side-effects of what it means to be hybrid in a multicultural society.

What the comic effects in *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* reveal is the gulf between what post-colonial hybrid subjects should be in theory and what human beings *are*. The novels surveyed expose the (potentially ironic) discrepancy between post-colonial ideals and human everyday practice, thus exposing conflicts and catastrophes that haunt individuals in a hybrid, post-colonial society. As novels of British migrant fiction, *Anita and Me*, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *White Teeth* do not offer easy solutions or didactic concepts on how to navigate in such an environment. They rather illustrate and criticise the strategies with which their protagonists attempt to compensate for what they believe is their hybrid incompleteness: assimilation into the mainstream, traditionalist and fundamentalist thinking and the wearisome alternation of lifestyles that only seem to fit temporarily, are excessively employed to overcome the state of in-betweenness. The society and the individuals represented in the novels at hand are far from post-colonial ideals such as anti-racist thinking, tolerance and the celebration of hybridity. What Syal, Kureishi and Smith offer instead are critical portrayals of a humanity irritated by their ‘everyday hybridity’ (Moss) and struggling with the post-colonial premise that ‘we’re all hybrid now’ (Head) as a catalyst for a feeling of unbelonging, human restlessness, and new fundamentalisms.

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Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit Humor in der britischen Migrantenliteratur. Gegenstand der Untersuchung sind Erzählmechanismen, die komisches Potential besitzen und die Erzählweisen in den Primärtexten (Meera Syal' *Anita and Me*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* und Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*) stark prägen.

Die Dissertation wendet sich insbesondere gegen Interpretationsansätze aus der postkolonialen Perspektive, die die Rezeption aller drei Werke dominieren. Demnach seien ihre Darstellungen von Rassismus, Ethnizität und hybriden Identitäten ein Ausdruck post-kolonialen Widerstandes gegen die hegemoniale Mehrheitskultur. Auch der Humor in den vorliegenden Texten wird zumeist aus der post-kolonialen Sicht heraus interpretiert: Der teils beißende Spott der Erzählfiguren wende sich gegen neo-koloniale Strömungen im heutigen multikulturellen Großbritannien und gegen alle Versuche, rigide Identitäten und Kulturen zu propagieren.

Die Autorin setzt sich mit just diesen Postulaten auseinander. Mit Hilfe eines theoretischen Gerüsts zu Humor in literarischen Texten analysiert sie komische Effekte in der britischen Migrantenliteratur und untersucht, in welchem Licht post-koloniale Postulate dadurch tatsächlich erscheinen. Textanalysen zeigen, dass sich die obigen Lesarten nicht aufrecht erhalten lassen. Dies ist vor allem der Komplexität des Humors als erzählerisches Mittel geschuldet. Es ist festzustellen, dass beispielsweise der Rassismus in den Romanen allgegenwärtig ist. Doch erst die humoristische Erzählweise offenbart, dass keiner der Protagonisten, seien sie nun weiße Briten oder Migranten der ersten oder zweiten Generation, vor rassistischem Gedankengut gefeit ist. Rassimus ist nur eine menschliche Disposition bzw. Schwäche von vielen, die alle Charaktere besitzen und die der Humor für den Leser zutage fördert. Post-koloniale Dichotomien wie etwa Täter/Opfer werden der Komplexität der Darstellungen rassistischen bzw. ethnozentrischen Gedankenguts nicht gerecht. Ähnlich kritisch verhalten sich die Primärtexte mittels Erzählkomik auch zum im post-kolonialen Diskurs oftmals verherrlichten Konzept der hybriden Identität als der anzustrebenden Lebensform, die fest determinierte Identitätsmerkmale wie Kultur, Ethnie oder Religion konterkariert. Komische Effekte in den drei vorliegenden Romanen legen jedoch offen, dass Hybridität mit Vorsicht zu genießen ist: Alle Charaktere finden ihre in sich gebrochenen, fließenden Identitäten als einen unerträglichen Zustand, der sich nur durch den Rückfall in festgefahrene, traditionelle und teils fundamentalistische Weltsichten aufheben lässt.

Vielmehr wird mittels Humor eine humanistische Weltsicht propagiert und universelle, menschliche Eigenschaften (und Schwächen), die alle Charaktere ausnahmslos besitzen, offen gelegt und kommentiert. Dieser humanistische, universelle Ansatz stellt die Ausrichtung aller drei Romane dar: beyond the post-colonial.

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