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**Performing Identity: Intertextuality, Race and Difference in the South Asian Novel
in English**

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A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he's managed it

(Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, 49)

Writing in 1928 an anonymous Indian critic compared the sympathetic portrayal of Indians in *A Passage to India* to the actual reception accorded to the Indian visitor to England: 'if all the people he met were Forsterized he would not nearly so often find himself forced into false positions ... He is conceived long before he is accosted, and finds himself constrained to live up to somebody else's false notion or perhaps a thousand false notions.' (Gardner 1973: 292) Here, in the form of a plea for greater understanding, is an early instance of that consciousness which has grown and come to pervade contemporary postcolonial writing, with its frequent metafictional knowingness and concern for questions of knowledge and power: the remarkable persistence of the 'second-hand', already-read quality in the British-Indian relationship. Through the deployment of postmodern techniques of parody, pastiche and intertextual shaping, the South Asian novel in English often seeks to contest the 'lessons' of a literary corpus wherein a two-way gaze fixes both sides in a relationship of inequitable power and mutual misrecognition.

South Asian literature in English has been at the forefront of debates over the relationship of postcolonialism and postmodernism ever since the appearance of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981. A number of writers have testified to the influence of Rushdie, and magical realist narratives have appeared fictionalising the historical experience of the Anglo-Indian and Parsi communities, among other groups, while writers from the Indian and Pakistani diasporas have been quick to adopt and adapt international stylistic influences.¹ Such novels often inscribe an implicit dialogue or creative tension between the overt political programme of postcolonialism and the linguistic focus of postmodernism. Yet there is a deeper sense in which South Asian writing rehearses the same preoccupations that also inform poststructuralist and postmodern theories. This essay will argue that the conscious intertextuality of a number of these novels inscribes a recognition that literary representations of India operate in a discursive field that is always haunted by, and in dialogue with, colonial constructions that have preceded them. In the Indo-British relationship, the tentacular grip of orientalist and colonial textuality has been such that there might almost be said to be an overdetermination of textuality, with concomitant implications for notions of identity: an idea explored in the work of writers as diverse as V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi. Ideas of an authentic space outside or beyond such framing representations are problematised. This awareness reaches its peak in the writings of second and third generation authors, often of mixed background, such as the British Indian novelist and journalist Hari Kunzru. For such writers it is no longer a case of choosing one or other tradition or identity, but recognising that one is a product of both as they have been mutually constituted through acts of representation.

This concern with textuality and intertextuality marks one of the intersections of postcolonialism and postmodernism. For one thing, both question the grand narratives and over-riding certainties of Western superiority that animated the Enlightenment and also the colonial age, and both understand them to be textually disseminated in various ways. This creates a shared agenda between postmodernism and some types of postcolonialism aimed at deconstructing the logocentric master-narratives of European thought and culture. A postmodern perspective might insist on the constructed and linguistically tendentious facets of such narratives, whereas from a postcolonial viewpoint it is also important to debunk the myth of Europe as the source and origin of all knowledge and progress. Hence that interest, shared by postcolonialism and postmodernism in forms of irony, parody and mimicry. A text such as *Midnight's Children*, for example, is playful, ironic and self-conscious in a way that could be termed postmodern. Yet it is also important to note that that book – like a number of other postcolonial texts – uses features drawn from the indigenous narrative and popular cultures of India and elsewhere that predate the so-called 'postmodern' moment. But because such works seem to affect a kind of deconstruction of certain Western assumptions or modes of narrative they are often gathered under the umbrella of postmodernism by critics anyway.

This should alert us to the danger of simply imposing postmodernism as a kind of blanket to throw over cultural productions from outside the western mainstream. Is a theory developed to describe the experience of the affluent post-industrial West actually fit to account for literature from former colonial spaces, many of which still live with the economic legacy of colonial exploitation? In other words, applying western concepts like

'postmodernism' willy-nilly to non-western cultural forms could merely be another means of co-opting and exercising intellectual and ideological control over them. There are further implications in this for those texts that attempt to convey something about subjectivity and identity in forms such as autobiography and *bildungsroman*, much favoured by postcolonial writers. Linda Hutcheon, whose critical work is often alert to the formal challenges thrown up by the differing agendas of postcolonialism and postmodernism, draws a parallel between feminist and postcolonial uses of deconstructive textual strategies, but also issues a warning: 'The current post-structuralist/postmodern challenge to the coherent, autonomous subject has to be put on hold in feminist and postcolonial discourses, for both must work first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity; those radical postmodern challenges which are, in many ways, the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses' (Hutcheon 1995: 130-1).

This is a fair point; you can only afford the luxury of deconstructing your identity if your identity has not been systematically denied in the first place. However, it may hold more salience for those writers who would seek to articulate what could be termed subaltern identities or positions in overt opposition to those of the West. It may be less true of those writers whose mixed heritage and culturally hybrid backgrounds lead to a more critical interrogation of the very differences once deemed central to antagonistic colonial and anti-colonial relations. What of the hybrid writer of the second or third generation, whose identity has been formed in diasporic locations, and who attempts to work through the legacy of imperial ways of seeing: ways of seeing that are at once conflicted and partial, but equally constitutive of identity in some ways? In other words,

what of the writer who understands intertextuality not simply as a literary device but also as a way to understand the self in an equally textually transmitted world?

Kunzru's novel *The Impressionist* (2002) is a polyphonic text woven from allusions to, and pastiches of, the classic literary narratives of empire. On one level, this intertextuality is part of its characteristic postcolonial attack on Manichean identity structures and fetishization of kinds of purity. Yet, rather than merely celebrating cultural hybridity, the text instead probes the unease of deracinated, in-between positions. Identity, in *The Impressionist*, is revealed as dialogic and performative, only attainable through the gaze of the Other. Yet, for the central character, Pran – unlike the protagonists of earlier novels – not only is there no 'moment of arrival' at a stable identity, it is suggested that there may be no authentic 'self' at all beyond the network of colonial representations through which he has constructed his personae.

In writing, this sense of the already-written and already-read often leads to mixed forms wherein textual apprehensions are anterior to any external reality. How do these texts create a space for this recognition? And how do they contest the ideological limitations it imposes? The narrative self-consciousness inherent in intertextuality allows for a critical reflection on the process of hybridisation in identity formation inasmuch as this, too, is partly produced through forms of representation. Likewise, the relationship of intertextuality to lived experience might be thought of as a way of encoding experience through familiar cultural forms – that is, as a kind of shorthand for certain types of indicative experience – while also thereby gesturing towards a pre-history of the text which is linked to the culture-giving aspects of colonialism.

The notion of intertextuality employed here is predicated on an understanding that the meaning of a literary text is to be found not in authorial intention or formalistic hermeneutics, but rather that it exists, in Graham Allen's phrase, 'between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates' (Allen 2000: 1). This includes those texts which it cites and alludes to, but also varieties of plot, types of character, symbolic structures, generic features and so on. It also includes the social (con)text informing the work (2000: 14). For Bakhtin, from whom the idea of intertextuality first derives, there is no such thing as a singular utterance. All language use is a 'two-sided act'. Bakhtin says that, 'language for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's' (Bakhtin 1981: 293). In order to make it one's own an act of 'appropriation' – of an utterance that is already infused with the traces of myriad existing usages – is necessary, but even then it will never be entirely one's own. For postcolonialists, the notion of appropriation in relation to another's language and culture system will be familiar as a staple of theory at least since *The Empire Writes Back*. However, in that text, it is to a large extent taken to mean a conscious, willed political act on the part of the postcolonial writer. To refocus our attention on intertextuality is also to recognise that postcolonial writers in English, are always already writing 'within and yet against' the othering processes of colonial fiction (Allen 2000: 160).

Furthermore, when considering postcolonial intertextuality, it is necessary to bear in mind that broader history which will feed into the literary text: what Kristeva calls 'the cultural or social text'. Those discursive and historical struggles that characterise the social text will continue to reverberate in the literary text. For Kristeva, "the literary

word” [is] ... an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee ... and the contemporary or earlier cultural context’ (Kristeva 1980: 65). That is to say, a text communicates not only with its readers, but also with what Kristeva calls, ‘an anterior or synchronic literary corpus’ (1980: 66). The double-voiced nature of intertextuality, its embodiment of more than one perspective, allows it to resist the monologic drives of authoritarian discourses (such as colonialism) and to hold the potential for a radical social critique.

Postcolonial intertextuality takes a variety of forms: quotation and allusion; intertexts as structuring frameworks for plot and thematics; the collage type, where the juxtaposition of many intertexts creates an effect and thereby generates meaning; and the intertext-as-archive, where a dialogic engagement is conducted between the novel and aspects of a broader cultural discourse – the grand narratives of Science or History – fostered by colonialism. Theo D’Haen has described how postcolonial intertextuality creates ‘afterlives’ for its canonical forebears. In such reworkings, he says, ‘the “original” disappears after having been consumed by its “afterlife”. Or, for the reader that does go back to the “original”, the latter has been utterly changed by its “translation”.’ This is not a simple continuation of the life and authority of the canonical text, ‘but rather ... an updated version, giving it new meanings, tying it to new locales, different times’ (D’Haen 2012: 128-9). Intertextual practices vary, from direct rewritings and appropriations of imperial fictions such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Tempest*, or *Jane Eyre*, to work that contains a more immanent acknowledgement of how a colonial literary and cultural hegemony actually shapes identity.ⁱⁱ This latter kind can operate in different

ways. It can either expose and contest colonial narrative hegemony: as in *The Buddha of Suburbia* where Karim comes to critique the stereotyped role he is expected to play; mark the shortfall between a textually constructed, imaginary England and the reality – as in several of V. S. Naipaul’s novels but especially *The Enigma of Arrival*; satirize anglophile self-delusion (as in the character of Saladdin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses*); or inscribe the more unsettling possibility that, as Homi Bhabha would have it, colonial identity actually exists *between* coloniser and colonised and that textuality is the primary means by which we come to an understanding of who we are.

There are questions raised in intertextual theory which this essay can only touch upon briefly: for example, that of what could be termed the ‘location of intertextuality’; does the site of intertextuality lie in the idea and technique of the author, in the reader – bringing a degree of literary competence to bear -- or in the text itself? Likewise, one must acknowledge the difference between the poststructuralist version’s emphasis on general semiotic processes of cultural signification, and a more formalist approach tracing elements of the internal textual architecture, so to speak. (In what follows I will endeavour to hold the two approaches together as, arguably, does the novel I will be examining.) Finally, it should be noted that, despite Barthes’ insistence that, ‘the citations that go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read ...’ (Barthes 1977: 160), in Kunzru’s novel, the intertexts are anything but ‘untraceable’; indeed, they are frequently foregrounded and operate on the level both of genre – the colonial novel of India – and of those individual texts cited and parodied.

The Impressionist is a polyphonic text that employs many different narrative tones – ribald, tender, impressionistic, satirical and fantastical – and that strategically deploys

direct intertexts to form the fabric of the picaresque tale. Kunzru offers pasquinades of the classic literary narratives of India by Kipling, Forster, Orwell and others. In so doing his text confronts many of the dominant cultural forms and ideas from the ‘social text’ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: anthropology, Social Darwinism, Theosophy and Spiritualism, communism, fascism, anti-Semitism, and anti-colonial Indian nationalism. This polyphony is the formal corollary of the theme of mixing, transgression and changing identity, played out in the central character, Pran, the child of a brief encounter between a British colonial tree-planter and a Hindu moneylender’s daughter in the early years of the twentieth century.

Pran begins life in the home of a wealthy Brahmin pandit in Agra who believes himself to be the child’s father. Revelation of Pran’s illegitimacy, however, results in the boy being cast out and forced to fend for himself. In the rambunctious adventures that follow Pran goes through a series of different incarnations. First of all, he is taken to work in a brothel run by hermaphrodites (or *hijras*) who dress him in women’s apparel and rename him Rukhsana. Here he is spotted by a representative from the princely state of Fatehpur, who whisks him away to the palace, intending to use his waiflike charms and newly acquired sexual skills to compromise the British representative, a Major Privett-Clampe, and so ensure the succession of the Raja’s scheming younger brother. Finally extricating himself from the political intrigue of the palace, having been tutored in the English language and aspects of culture by the infatuated Major, Pran proceeds to Amritsar just in time to find himself caught up in the 1919 massacre, when British troops fired on unarmed protestors. Despite this experience, Pran has come to associate Englishness with a superior way of life. Thereafter, his aim is to become as English as

possible and eliminate all traces of his Indian origins. He sees identity as a ladder with whiteness and Englishness at the top and blackness at the bottom. After a period in Bombay with a Christian missionary and amateur devotee of anthropometry – during which period he is re-christened Bobby – Pran takes on the identity of a young Englishman he has briefly met and who has been killed in a riot in the city. Armed with his freakish white skin, and the necessary paperwork to legitimate his new identity as ‘Jonathan Bridgeman’, he sails away to the promised land of England where he attends a minor public school, goes up to Oxford and embarks on an ill-starred love affair with the flighty daughter of an anthropology don. When this relationship comes to an abrupt end he joins the Professor’s party exploring a little known part of Africa. Here he is brought up against blackness, that part of himself he has forcibly repressed for so long. This results in some kind of identity crisis and he leaves the little party of explorers, eventually ending up wandering in the desert, the old coordinates of that so-carefully acquired and polished Englishness shed like an unwanted skin.ⁱⁱⁱ

Pran’s expulsion from his home at the start signals the beginning of the problematisation of any fixed notion of identity. Indeed, several other characters in the book also undergo a sloughing off or a soaking away of identity. On one level the novel launches a characteristic postcolonial attack on Manichean identity structures and fetishization of kinds of purity. A number of characters harbour miscegenatory fantasies, underlining the proximity of colonial racism to desire: for example, the zealous missionary McFarlane is constantly subsuming the lust he feels for his dusky female catechists beneath a pseudo-scientific system of racial classification in which they will be forever ‘beneath’ him in the evolutionary scale. The blurring of boundaries most notable

in Pran's multiple identities is everywhere present both in the colonial India described in the first half of the book, and in the England of the second: the hermaphrodites are, of course, in-between genders; the Spiritualism favoured by Mrs McFarlane, the missionary's wife, offers a space where not only British and Indian but also living and dead can mingle; and Dr Noble, Principal of Chopam Hall public school experiments in cross-fertilising orchids, and is first 'discovered in the act of hybridisation' (Kunzru 2003: 308).

In fact the theme of hybridity and mongrelisation is highlighted, not only in Pran's mixed biological background, but also in his aspirations to Englishness. As he becomes more adept at projecting himself as English he becomes harder to classify. He is described as hovering 'at the limit of perception, materialising ... like someone only semi-real' (2003: 237). When Pran arrives at the mission in Bombay, McFarlane thinks of him as 'white yet not white' (2003: 234), immediately recalling Homi Bhabha's formulation to describe the locus of the radically split or 'hybrid' subject, 'not quite/not white' (Bhabha 1994: 85-92). His hybridity disconcerts the colonial master too: McFarlane finds 'something almost too avid about his concentration' in their encounters. Using his childhood talent for mimicry Pran – or Bobby as he is now -- tries to create himself as the perfect Englishman. His notions of England are textually derived, hence the purpose and purchase of the intertextual technique Kunzru employs on the levels of both form and content. Englishness can be learned: Pran memorises poetry and refines his accent and punctuation with Privett-Clampe, gains a knowledge of English history from McFarlane, and, on arrival in England, keeps a notebook wherein he records his

observations and compares the English originals to those social and cultural practices he has learned about second hand.

Indeed, much emphasis is placed on detail and appearances, such as precise pronunciation or the cut of a tailored suit. Pran-as-Bobby's skin becomes a screen for projected effects. He fascinates those who encounter him; all of them 'are prisoners of the conviction that if they stared hard enough, they could unearth what lies beneath the beautiful mask of Bobby's face. ... Yet this aura would not be there if Bobby knew why he does what he does' (Kunzru 2003: 250). Obliquely the question is raised of whether there is anything beneath the surface at all. We learn, 'Bobby is a creature of surface ... He hints at transparency ... Maybe, instead of imagining depth, all the people who do not quite know him should accept that Bobby's skin is not a boundary between things but the thing itself, a screen on which certain effects take place. Ephemeral curiosities. Tricks of the light.' (2003: 250) Identity in the text is forever bound up with such outward forms. In fact, for the most part, it is revealed as a 'continuum' (2003: 251) in this book full of mutability and becoming. Sections characteristically end in conflagrations of sorts – a tiger hunt that turns into a massacre, an anti-British riot – resulting in some kind of purgation, out of which Pran emerges in the next chapter in a new incarnation.

Indeed, the question of how we might read Pran's transformations is raised in the text itself. We are offered one option for understanding his mutability: 'You could think of it in cyclical terms. The endlessly repeated day of Brahma – before any act of creation the old world must be destroyed. Pran is now in pieces. A pile of Pran-rubble, ready for the next chance event to put it back together in a new order' (2003: 65). One is also tempted to apply the concept of *asrama*, the four ideal stages in Hindu life, to this text.

Pran is a *brahmacharya* (a student or apprentice) as he learns how to be English from Privett-Clampe and MacFarlane: a somewhat frustrated and unsuccessful householder or husband (*grihasthya*) as he pursues the elusive Star Chapel; a *vanaprasthya* when he withdraws into the heart of Africa with Professor Chapel's expedition; and finally a *sanyasi*, renouncing the world and wandering in the desert at the book's end. However, we can also view Pran's mutations as another variant of the postmodern and postcolonial critique of Enlightenment thought: as a reworking of the empiricist notion of identity as formulated by Locke.

Summarising the key ideas in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Antony Easthope describes how Locke set aside the traditional belief that identity was conferred by possession of an immortal soul, in favour of personal memory as 'constitutive of individual identity conceived as diachronic'. According to Locke, 'identity ... is constituted inwardly as "the Identity of *consciousness*" ... rather than on the basis of the continuity of the body or identity socially inscribed' (Easthope 1999: 80). Postcolonial revisions of Enlightenment thought have typically broadened this paradigm of identity to include the formative role of history: the migrations of peoples during and after colonialism and the mixing of cultures that has resulted. However, what I am arguing here is that a number of writers on the British connection with India and its diasporas have also understood the pivotal role of *textuality*, the mutually determining power of the gaze, and the already-read (that is, the stereotype) in the construction of identity. This commonly appears in the idea that England and Englishness are textually preconceived – often before the country is ever seen – by characters whose mental universe is decisively shaped by the colonial encounter.

Thus we can account for the determinedly intertextual nature of a work such as V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*. Naipaul's elegiac evocation of the Wiltshire landscape famously draws on Wordsworth, Cobbett, Hardy, T. S. Eliot and a host of others in its description of the writer-narrator's attempts to apprehend accurately his surroundings and reconcile the power of those literary representations of Englishness he has been exposed to in his Trinidadian childhood with the decaying post-imperial reality. He slowly comes to recognise constant change, rather than changelessness in all around him. A catalyst and a context is provided by the second section, 'The Journey', describing the young writer-narrator's excursion from his Caribbean home, first to New York and then to London, on his way to study at Oxford. Writing retrospectively, the narrator is able to see the creatively stunting alienation produced by his colonial education, with its inculcated ideas of 'the literary' based on Bloomsbury paradigms. Naipaul's young writer must learn the slow and painful lesson that his real subject is not sensibility or inward development, but 'the worlds I contained within myself, the worlds I lived in' (Naipaul, 1987: 135). Growing to maturity involves reconciling the young man undergoing the experience with the writer who would record them. This provides a shape and a destination for the book he is writing. By the end: 'The story had become more personal: my journey, the writer's journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing rather than by his personal adventures, writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again in a second life just before the end' (1987: 309). This last phrase is significant. Earlier in the text Naipaul refers to his time in the Wiltshire valley as 'my second childhood of seeing and learning' (1987: 82): a phrase immediately evocative of Locke's model of identity acquisition, with the child

as *tabula rasa* building up knowledge, and thus identity, through experience. While, on one level, the task for the narrator is to extricate himself from the snares of the learned and the textual, there is nevertheless an essential ‘self’ behind the writing (as one might expect in what is a memoir in fictional form):

India was special to England; for two hundred years there had been any number of English travellers’ accounts and latterly novels. I could not be that kind of traveller ... there was no model for me here ... neither Forster, nor Ackerley, nor Kipling could help. To get anywhere in the writing, I had first of all to define myself very clearly to myself. (1987: 140-1)

Naipaul’s innate conservatism and lack of interest in postmodern constructivist views of identity can partly account for his ultimate recourse to a unified, first person speaking subject in *The Enigma of Arrival*. However, in another text from the late nineteen-eighties, Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, we seem to be witnessing a more recognisably postmodern onslaught on Enlightenment paradigms and notions of identity, most strikingly in the metamorphoses of the two central characters, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, into haloed angel and horned beast respectively. Rushdie’s diabolic narrator recognizes the problematisation of identity that ensues. He suggests that Gibreel and Saladdin embody ‘two fundamentally different types of self’:

Might we not agree that Gibreel, for all his stage-name and performances ... has wished to remain, to a large degree continuous – that is joined to and arising from his past; ... whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of selected discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, ‘false’? (Rushdie, 1992: 427)

And, although the narrator then backs away from such hard and fast distinctions – ‘resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, “pure”’ (1992: 427) -- it *is* the case that Saladin’s idealized, picture-postcard vision of England is an attempt to draw back from ‘real history’, history-as-process, at the very moment when he is feeling its effect through racist demonization. In fact, what ensures continuity of identity in this text full of grotesque bodily transmogrifications, is not individual memory, but a consciousness of history and race, as embodied in the radical poet Jumpy Joshi and, more indirectly, in the second-generation British-Bangladeshi Sufyan sisters. One might argue that the lesson of these sections of the book for Saladin is to reconnect with his past self: a movement culminating in the uncharacteristic emotionally evocative naturalism of the final scene where Saladin is reconciled with his dying father. Rushdie’s poststructuralist disclaimer notwithstanding, there does seem to be an ‘essential’ Saladin behind the anglophile mask: his cut glass accent momentarily slips when he is woken by an air stewardess on the flight back to India, and his lover Zeeny Vakil gleefully likens it to a false moustache (Goonetilleke 1998: 77).

Graham Huggan has described the politics on display in both *The Enigma of Arrival* and *The Satanic Verses* as being centred on ‘staged marginalities’ (Huggan 2001: 88). Whereas, for him, ‘Naipaul’s novel effectively stages a worn-out psychodrama of imperial imposture’, Rushdie’s text performs the ambiguity (and co-optability) of ‘exotic’, hybrid and marginal identities (2001: 90). By contrast, a sense of deliberate staging and performance is always foregrounded in the work of Hanif Kureishi, whose books and screenplays explore ‘the political dimensions of its own theatricality’ (2001: 93) As Huggan puts it, in Kureishi’s work, ‘Minorities are encouraged, in some cases

obliged to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other' (2001: 95).

Indeed, with its emphasis on identity as performance, Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, would seem to share most with Kunzru's take on ontology and textuality. It is tempting to read this as a by-product of the 'new breed' of Englishman personified by both authors, as well as by their literary creations. Karim's political education takes place through set-piece moments, such as the expressionist theatre production of *The Jungle Books* where, 'browned-up' for the part and looking like 'a turd in a bikini bottom' (Kureishi 1991: 146), he is forced to confront white England's textually constructed notions of authentic India. As Bart Moore-Gilbert has said, Kureishi's novel, 'provides a searching analysis of the performative and constructed nature of ethnic and national identities' (Moore-Gilbert 2002: 47). This also takes the form of Karim's father's transformation from civil servant into the eponymous Buddha of Suburbia: taking up with gusto the guise of eastern mystic his white audience expects. This 'renegade Muslim masquerading as a Buddhist' (Kureishi 1991: 16) panders to western expectations, but rather than being a pre-eminent example of the Indian mimic man who constructs himself for the delectation of the colonial master, it can be claimed that his role-playing exposes the narcissistic cultural tourism of his audience. In over-playing his hand, Dad's performance is of a piece with Karim's small subversions in the play: sending up the thick Indian accent he's been told to use and lapsing into broad cockney (1991: 58). In the end, the text suggests the possibility of using textually apprehended stereotypes against the colonial master – just as the novel as a whole is in effect a pastiche of our retrospective idea of the nineteen-seventies as an era of

permissiveness and sexual experimentation, casual drug-taking, changing musical fashions and dubious sartorial trends, inflected so as to include those elements often overlooked by the nostalgia industry: racism and self-serving liberal exoticism. The presence of stereotypes within stereotypes, and Karim's recognition that, 'if I wanted the additional bonus of an Indian past, I would have to create it' (1991: 213), undermines the director, Pyke's argument that in drama, 'To make your not-self real you have to steal from your authentic self' (1991: 219). Yet Dad's credo, 'that we couldn't allow ourselves the shame of failure in front of these people [white Britons]' (1991: 250), emphasises that the Indian, whether under the Raj or in post-imperial England, is always in the gaze of the white Briton.

As Bakhtin points out identity itself is dialogic inasmuch as it is only ever achieved in relation to an addressee whose answer affirms the subject's existence (Allen 2000: 172), and Bhabha gives this insight a psychoanalytic slant in his essay on Fanon: 'to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus' (Bhabha 1994: 44). Similarly, in *The Impressionist*, identity is also revealed as something one only attains through the gaze of, or in dialogue with, an Other; at one point we learn that Pran 'exists only when being observed' (Kunzru 2003: 347). In a sense, one creates a self for external consumption in terms one expects will be recognised. Yet, while there may be no stable concept of identity offered in *Buddha*, what Steven Connor sees as the central question of the book – 'how to resist the effects of typification' (Connor 1996: 98) – marks a key difference between Kureishi and Kunzru's texts, since on one level *The Impressionist* seems to suggest that one cannot avoid typification: that after four hundred

years of textual apperception, and in our postmodern, hyper-mediated world there may be nothing else to see.

In his various refinements of self we are told that ‘Bobby builds and inhabits his puppets ...’ (2003: 250), and there is a strong sense of identity as fixed through expectation and prejudice, as dependent on stereotyping. The colonial scenario adds a special dimension to this fixity. One of the intertexts hinted at in the novel is the work of George Orwell, both in his novel *Burmese Days* and in the celebrated essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’ (Orwell 1957: 91-100). Central to colonial identity as performance is the importance of spectacle and of being seen to behave in the expected manner. Kunzru’s novel reproduces that sense of the hollowness and absurdity of the whole thing that also occurs to Orwell’s imperial policeman sent out to kill an elephant that has earlier gone *must* but who is now quietly grazing. Not only does *The Impressionist* present us with the similarly absurd posturing and actual tenuousness of power of the colonial servants in the princely state of Fatehpur, we are first introduced in a similarly Orwellian vein, to the ill-fated real Jonathan Bridgeman, weaving drunkenly around the riot-torn streets of Bombay. However, in this case, instead of an elephant, he is accompanied by a cow he has befriended. Together they are described, in the midst of the mayhem, ‘Under the lights, still performing for all they are worth’ (2003: 276).

Yet, despite its portrayal of ontological mutability and what Jopi Nyman has called identity ‘constructed through performance’ (Nyman 2009: 101), *The Impressionist* is not ultimately a celebration of cultural hybridity. To be continually in a state of becoming is also a form of evasion: ‘Then becoming is flight, running knowing that stopping will be worse because then the suspicion will surface again that there is *no one*

running. No one running, No one stopping. No one there at all' (2003: 463). The text, in fact, probes the unease of deracinated, in-between positions; they are not seen as an end in themselves, as a final destination. In fact, at the very moment that he feels he has arrived as an Englishman, Pran is unsettled to discover that he is just too English for the tastes of his object of desire, the apparent apotheosis of the doll-like English rose, Star Chapel. Instead she craves the sexual frisson associated with blackness. Pran is horrified to discover that she is having an affair with a black Jazz musician in Paris. Hers is the flipside of colonial racist disdain: the covert desire for a fantasy of blackness – a fetishized black sexuality lacking the inhibitions of the staid English. The discovery of Star's inter-racial affair exposes the limitations of the white English construct. Even so, I find it difficult to concur with Shane Graham's suggestion that towards the end of the novel 'the chameleon-like Jonathan [Pran] reluctantly begins to confront the superficiality of the false identity he has invented for himself' (Graham 2013: 442). This reading seems altogether too wedded to the notion that a 'real' self, submerged by colonial mimicry, is waiting to resurface: something the text avoids confirming in its ambiguous denouement. More telling, in this novel-of-surfaces, is the fact that Pran himself is at all times surrounded by other stereotypes.

Pran's efforts to blend in with the England of Prep and Public School and Oxbridge merely operate to confirm the inevitably performative nature of Englishness (at least in its colonial, middle class form). We are told that Pran is a consummate actor who, 'deals in stereotypes' (2003: 237). Indeed, throughout the novel, Kunzru deploys strategic stereotypes, such as the disappointed colonial administrator Privett-Clampe, the repressed missionary McFarlane, and Professor Chapel the eccentric academic. There is likewise a

sense in which Pran is, himself, always read reductively as a stereotype by those who come into contact with him. He has adopted a certain role and has defined himself in terms that will ensure recognition and a dialogic answer. Indeed, Pran's attempts to become *the perfect Englishman* are themselves based on textually transmitted, circumscribed and practiced versions of Englishness: an Englishness that can be 'parsed'. His success is predicated on the very fact that others also think through, and recognise, the stereotypes he embodies: something that emphasises the stereotype's dialogic nature. Perhaps, what Steven Connor has argued of Rushdie's *Saladin Chamcha* applies equally to Pran: that his masquerade in the heart of Englishness suggests, 'the supplement of contending histories' (Connor 1996: 120), those narratives that are often excluded from conservative accounts of national identity. Similarly, one might ask whether we too, as readers, are being asked to read the Pran character-receptacle as simply a string of stereotypes, a series of ever-shifting surfaces with no depth, a sentence with no full stop.

There are, of course, political objections to the reading I have outlined here emphasising, as it does, the stereotype over lived experience. Any idea of agency, it could be argued, is surrendered to the all-embracing power of textuality. Yet it should be noted that not only is Kunzru offering what could be read as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of obsessive colonial mimicry, in choosing to foreground the already-read quality of the British-Indian relationship he can be seen to be following those earlier writers mentioned above by exposing an artifice that continues to obtrude on contemporary community relations, especially now, in an era of global terrorism and a heightened anxiety about national identity, race and belonging. This is also to offer a partial answer to those objections raised by critics such as Arun Mukherjee, who has attacked the idea that all

postcolonial texts have a parodic or revisionist relationship to imperial textuality and that postcolonial subjectivity is, thus, shown to be still tied to the erstwhile colonizer. The whole concept of ‘writing back’, according to Mukherjee’s reading, implies ‘that we do not write out of our own needs but rather out of our obsession with an absent other’ (Mukherjee 1990: 6), and texts such as those cited here – with their investment in rewriting aspects of colonial literary discourse -- merely constitute ‘a new inflection of “Orientalism”’ (Moore-Gilbert 2002: 53).

Such objections have been effectively answered by theorists such as Stephen Slemon, who has pointed out that cultural acts of resistance always involve an ambiguous refusal, but also an acknowledgement of colonial power, inasmuch as they employ a first world medium. Just as anti-colonial Indian nationalism – as its very name makes clear – invoked Enlightenment values of self-determination in the bounded space of a nation state marked out by the colonizer, so too:

a theory of literary resistance *must* recognise the inescapable partiality .. the untranscendable *ambiguity* of literary or indeed any contra/dictory or contestatory act which employs a First-World medium for the figuration of a Third-World resistance, and which predicates a semiotics of *refusal* on a gestural mechanism whose first act must always be an acknowledgement and a recognition of the reach of colonialist power. (Slemon 1990: 37)

One might add that, for mixed-heritage writers such as Kureishi and Kunzru the binary scenario invoked by Mukherjee may be merely a distracting anachronism.

Moreover, it is possible to argue, along with Huggan that, ‘To see different aspects of identity – sexual, ethnic/racial, national, socio-political – as elements of a

wider cultural performance permits an understanding of marginality in terms other than those of social advantage and exclusion ... Marginality becomes, instead, a self-empowering strategy within minority discourse', akin to that celebrated by Bhabha in his essay, 'How Newness Enters the World' (Huggan 2001: 103). Indeed, Huggan's interest in the political potential of playing with pre-existing stereotypes suggests another way of understanding the politics of intertextuality in *The Impressionist*. Writing of the presentation and marketing of Arundhati Roy's 1997 Booker Prize winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, Huggan discerns the presence of what he terms a 'strategic exoticism' in the book's evocation of India, which acknowledges the formative influence of prior textuality on its reception in the metropolis:

It is aware of the recent history of Indo-Anglian fiction, and of the parallel history of imperialist nostalgia in the west: the films of David Lean and of Merchant and Ivory; the profitable *Heart of Darkness* industry; the travel writing business with its recuperative parodies of imperial heroism and derring-do. In bringing these histories together, Roy's novel shows the continuing presence of an imperial imaginary lurking behind Indian literature in English. (Huggan 2001: 77)

I would argue that the same kind of "meta-exoticism" is in play in *The Impressionist* with its manipulation of 'commercially viable metropolitan codes' (2001: 81) in narratives of British India. Like Roy (and, says Huggan, Rushdie before her) Kunzru is aware that his writing: 'ostensibly oppositional, is vulnerable to recuperation; ironically rehearsing a continuing history of imperialist perceptions of an "othered" India (India available as spectacle; as alternating object of horror and fascination; as world of magic, mystery and wonders; as site of colonial nostalgia; as forbidden space of cross-cultural desire; as

romantic tourist goal; and so on)' (2001: 81) In short, *The Impressionist* self-consciously invokes an exoticized imperial gaze, and draws its readers into an awareness of the prevalence of such tropes in both writing and reading. The modification Kunzru offers appears in the fact that in his novel the 'exotic' is turned back on the metropolitan observer/reader; in those sections of the book set in England, it is also the exoticism of an 'othered' England seen through Pran's inexperienced eyes.

At the end of the novel, Pran has extricated himself from Professor Chapel's expedition. However, he becomes disorientated in the African wilderness inhabited by the Fotse people they have come to study. Confronted with the totally alien environment, and with no recognisable context in which to insert himself, the coordinates of his identity start to break down. Hallucinating and suffering from sunstroke, he is rescued by Fotse tribesmen and taken to a cave where an elderly sage, wordlessly diagnosing him as having been possessed by a 'European spirit', performs a rite of healing involving the patient being wrapped bodily in a chrysalis of caked mud, 'a clay mould inside which all is molten, formless and in flux' (Kunzru 2003: 473): 'he is an abyss, and the thing he thought was himself is plucked out and flung away, leaving only a nightmare, a monstrous disorder' (2003: 477). Here, we might say, Pran is stripped of those carefully cultivated identities he has performed throughout the story. In a sense, he undergoes Locke's developmental schema in reverse: shedding experience, knowledge, identity to become in the end – rather than at the beginning – a *tabula rasa*. In the same way, we might conclude, Kunzru's project of postcolonial intertextuality in *The Impressionist* operates to lead us through the labyrinth of narrative modes which has defined the mutual apprehension of British and Indian since the time of the East India Company, recognising

their potency and longevity but perhaps suggesting that, with the appearance of a new generation of writers who are the inheritors of all these modes equally, the time has come to acknowledge and bracket the mutually constitutive histories of colonialism and anti-colonialism which shape the world today. What emerges when this is done? A new Man? New modes of historical understanding? Time will tell. For now we are left with the receding image of an unnamed traveller in the desert, accompanied by a camel train and a row of nomadic drovers: ‘Tomorrow he will travel on’ (2003: 481).

ⁱ Examples of those novels which employ fantastical narrative styles, frequently drawing on indigenous traditions but which, nonetheless, are often understood in terms of the attempt to stage what Fredric Jameson famously called ‘national allegories’, include: Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989); Boman Desai’s *The Memroy of Elephants* (1988); and I. Allan Sealy’s *The Trotter Nama* (1988). The latter two books perform the task of ‘allegorising’ the communal experiences of the Parsi and Anglo-Indian communities respectively.

ⁱⁱ The most famous example of postcolonial intertextuality is probably Jean Rhys’ revision of *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Among the numerous other couplings of text and intertext are Wilson Harris’ *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) and *Heart of Darkness*; J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) and *Robinson Crusoe*; *Jack Maggs* (1997) by Peter Carey which re-imagines *Great Expectations*; Zadie Smith’s riff on *Howard’s End*, *On Beauty* (2005); and Lloyd Jones’ *Mr Pip* (2006) which translates aspects of *Great Expectations* to 1990s Papua New Guinea.

ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, it is difficult to know what to call the central character of this novel, since his transformations are not so much disguises as wholesale revolutions in identity. Eschewing the unwieldy compound names that suggested themselves – ‘Pran-Rukhsana-Bobby-Jonathan’ and so on – I have decided for the most part to

call the protagonist Pran throughout, despite the inevitable implication that this is, then, his true, essential identity: something the paper as a whole would clearly dispute.

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