The Search for Identity in *Anita and Me* and *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Introduction

Some identities come with birth, others are given to us, and some we require ourselves through life. One of the most important factors affecting our identity, is connected to the encounters that are made throughout life. Identity is therefore not something static but rather something that undergoes a continuous evolution. For some people this happens more than for others, both in terms of frequency and to more far-reaching extents. It can even be said that some individuals have a greater need for developing his/her identity more than others. This means that "identity" is more natural for some and more complex to others, depending on the social conditions in which they live. Modern societies are made up of complex social structures. Social structures and hierarchies that used to exist, and that people used to follow, are no longer relevant, which means that finding one’s identity is no longer simply a matter of course, as it used to be.

This scenario is even more complex to an individual who has yet another culture and social background, due to the fact that their parents are born in another country and have lived a large part of their lives there. These conditions can create more opportunities for the development of the individual’s identity but they can also lead to complications to that process. Rosi Braidotti, a professor of Women’s studies in the Arts Faculty of Ulecht University as well as the scientific director of the Netherlands Research School of Women’s Studies and of the Expertise Centre Gender and Multiculturalism (GEM), suggests that a European citizenship should be introduced. She argues that globalization causes the end to permanent identities and leads to hybridisation, which in turn affects us all and leads to the making of a multicultural Europe.
Both Karim, the main character in Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and Meena, the main character in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, are examples of individuals with this background whose identities are influenced and formed by the multicultural British society in which they live.

This essay consists of the following chapters; chapter one serves as a background to how a person’s identity is formed and other circumstances that may effect this evolution, such as immigrant background; chapter two deals with how community, the parents’ identity and the family influences identity; chapter three is about how friends and school have an effect on the development of identity, and the final chapter deals with the effects of prejudice and the possibilities for the future.
**Autobiography**

Hanif Kureishi, the screenwriter, novelist and filmmaker was born in Bromley, Kent in 1954. His father is a Pakistani immigrant and his mother is English. He read philosophy at King’s college. His first play, *Soaking the Heat*, was performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1976. He has won numerous awards for his work such as: the Thames Playwright Award (1980) and George Devine Award (1981) to name a few.

His first screenplay for the film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, was nominated for an Academy Award. He has also written the screenplays for *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and *London Kills Me* (1991), which he also directed. His film, *My Son the Fanatic*, was adapted from his short story (included in Love in a Blue Time 1997), was shown at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival.

Kureishi’s first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* is semi-autobiographical and was published in 1990. The novel won the Whitbread First Novel Award and was produced by the BBC in 1993, as a four-part television series. His second novel *The Black Album*, explores some of the issues facing the Muslim community in Britain, in the 1980s. *Love in a Blue Time*, his first collection of short stories, revolves around people working in the media. Other books by Kureishi are: *Intimacy, Midnight All Day, Gabrielle’s Gift, Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics, The Mother, My Ear at His Heart*.

Meera Syal MBE was born Feroza Syal June 27, 1961 in Essington, near Wolverhampton. She is a British Indian comedian, writer, playwright, singer, journalist and actress. Her parents were born in Punjabi and came from New Delhi to Britain. Syal has studied drama at Manchester University. She has worked for the Royal Court Theatre and won the National Student Drama Award, for *One of Us*, while still
a student. She won the Betty Task Award for her first book *Anita and Me* and the Media Personality of the Year award at the Commission for Racial Equality’s annual race in the Media awards in 2003. She has also written the screenplay for the 1993 film, *Bhaji on the Beach*. Other writings by Syal are: *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee, Sari, Jeans and Chilischoten*, the plays *One of Us, Bombay Dreams*. Television appearances: *Absolutely Fabulous, Goodness Gracious Me, Drop the Dead Donkey, The Kumars at No. 42* to mention only a few.
1. Aspects that influence the formation of a person’s identity

1.1 What is identity?

Kath Woodward, senior lecturer in sociology at both the Open University and Manchester University, states that identity is something different from personality in many important respects. The fact is that two individuals may share personality traits with one another but to share an identity takes some active engagement. She means that a person chooses to identify with a particular identity or group. It is important for the individual to have the same identity as one group of people and a different one from others. “Identity is marked by similarity, that is of the people like us, and by difference, of those who are not.”¹ Woodward claims that identity works as a link between individuals and the world in which they live as well as being a combination of how I see myself and how others see me. It is therefore, a socially recognized position.

According to Woodward, how a person sees himself/herself and how others see that person does not always fit. There might be a tension between all these different conflicting identities. “Material, social and physical constraints prevent us from successfully presenting ourselves in some identity positions – constraints which include the perception of others.”² Even though social structures may constrain people’s ability to adopt certain identities there is also the notion of social change which affects the shape of these structures which means that opportunities are opened for people to adopt new or hybrid identities.

Woodward refers to George Herbert Mead, an American social philosopher, who claimed that identities were produced in a social context and through the

² Woodward 7.
individual's thinking about what links him/her to the world. This is done through symbolizing. “We symbolize the sort of person we want others to think we are through the clothes we wear and the way in which we behave.” Woodward also refers to the importance of symbols since this is how a person signals his/her identity to others and a way to know which people we identify with and those who are distinguished as being different.

1.2 Identity development: female/ male

Woodward refers to Freud’s psychoanalytical theory regarding identity, in which both gender and sexuality are important to the understanding of identity. According to this theory the sense of who we are is very much linked to our awareness of our identities as women or as men. Our gender identity is influenced by factors that are: individual, collective, social and biological. Despite the modern society in which we live, gender identities are still often associated with stereotypical feminine and masculine traits. These traits that mirror the views of one's society, regarding what is seen as masculine and feminine, are termed gender-appropriate. Children are from an early age aware of these criteria and are able to categorize or choose toys according to Barbara David Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology, at the Australian National University. She states that it is evident that girls and boys very early on find out how each sex is supposed to play, dress and behave. Boys are to a higher degree than girls, expected to behave according to their gender. Cross-sex behaviour in boys is therefore evaluated negatively and sanctioned severely. This rigidity in gender stereotypes is at its height in primary school but continues throughout life. The authors ask the question: why it is less accepted for a boy to have feminine

3 Woodward 12.
behaviour than for a girl to have masculine behaviour? The answer lies in the power structures within society, which are connected to gender identity. For example, children see that their father’s job is more valued than their mother’s, that females are more likely to be interrupted when they speak and that in television programmes, males have more authority, are more materially well-off, professional, competent and powerful. Children learn and understand their gender identity by observation, what behaviour that is accepted, rewarded and punished.

1.3 Postcolonial influences on the individual’s identity in Britain

According to A. Singh Ghuman, the young South Asians face an important challenge regarding the sphere of identity formation. Their parents were secure in their personal and social identities since these were firmly rooted in their religion, culture, language and the region of the country they came from. “In contrast, the younger generation in the West is likely to find identity exploration and formation a real challenge because of dual socialization and racial prejudice.”

Singh Ghuman, claims that the younger South Asian generation in the West has to face some unique challenges which affect their identity, even though this generation enjoy many advantages over their immigrant parents, such as security and stability from the institutions, networks and other infrastructures built by their parents. He means that this group of young people is firstly socialized into two distinctive cultural traditions, one of the home and another of the school and of the wider society. “The home emphasizes the religion, culture and traditions of the 'sending' society, whereas school stresses the norms, values and attitudes deemed

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important by the 'receiving' society. There are irreconcilable differences between
the two, which can cause conflicting messages to the young.

Jean Phinney, Professor of psychology at the California State University,
argues that, based on Erikson’s identity formation theory, while forming their identity,
young South Asians are likely to go through various stages commencing in an
identity diffusion status where there is a lack of interest or concern with, ethnicity. At
the next stage, the foreclosure stage, ethnicity is based upon the unexamined views
of parents and of significant others (most probably peers). In the memorandum stage
there is an attempt to explore and to understand for oneself the meaning of one’s
ethnicity. At the final stage, the achievement stage, a clear and confident sense of
one’s own ethnicity is established.

Singh Guhman states that the younger generation, who are born and raised in
the West, perceive their gender roles differently from their parents and grandparents.
Since the 1960s, work concerning prejudice and discrimination against women has
led to girls achieving a higher academic standard than boys. “On the other hand,
South Asian families in the West, with some exceptions, have been slow in adapting
these changes because of their history and tradition.” He also points out the fact that
South Asian families in the West have a tendency to be more indulgent towards their
boys and are therefore willing to overlook the situation when they break the social
norm, food taboos, dress codes and dating and drinking.

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5 Guhman 32.
6 The German - American Psychoanalysts Erik H. Erikson stated that the development of the individual
was made up of different stages, where each stage incorporates a psychoanalytical conflict.
Identity formation:
1. identity diffusion
2. foreclosure
3. moratorium
4. identity achievement
7 Guhman 33.
Singh Ghuman says that South Asian families tend to have an orientation more towards the “collectivity” which leads to such customs and traditions as extended families, helping and supporting close family relatives, and arranged marriages. On the other hand, the younger generation is exposed to the rugged individualism of the West, which is perceived and interpreted as selfishness by most South Asian families. This young generation has in most cases no obligations to support relatives in the “sending” society i.e. no obligations to send money to parents or other relatives who live elsewhere.

Woodward refers to Kobena Mercer, a cultural studies analyst, who claims that the reason why identity is now so much in focus is because of the uncertainty and diversity that characterizes modern identity:

> We can also link the heightened concern about racialized and ethnicized identities to another feature of contemporary life. This is the impact of large – scale migration of people and rapid social and technological change and the uncertainty these have resulted in. The effect of a mix of old and new identities in a context of social change is to produce more uncertainty.⁸

She also states that: “The social changes that have made the UK the multiethnic society it is have led to uncertainties and insecurities about identities as well as opportunities for the formation of new identities.” ⁹

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⁸ Woodward 130-131.
⁹ Woodward 116.
2. Close relations/community that influence Karim’s and Meena’s identity

2.1 Parental identity

The author, Rosellen Brown, states that Meena’s parents are [...]”irredeemably middle-class”\textsuperscript{10}, they have a car, hold parties and are on the whole accepted due to their low profile. Meena’s mother grew up in a small Punjabi village. She wanted to find a place to live in England that reminded her of the village in which she was born, with fields, trees, light and space.

Meena’s mother makes a conscious decision, as her contribution to the English peoples’ education, when she chooses to wear traditional Indian clothes outside her workplace (as a teacher). “It was her duty to show them that we could wear discreet gold jewellery, dress in tasteful silks and speak English without an accent”\textsuperscript{11} Meena’s mother has two identities, one as the professional schoolteacher and the other, the perfect Indian housewife who, to Meena’s embarrassment, grows her own herbs in the front garden, and who does not like to waste money on something that she can make cheaper at home. “My mother never eat out, never, always affronted by paying for some over-boiled, under-seasoned dish of slop when she knew she could rustle up a hot, heartwarming meal from a few leftover vegetables and a handful of spices.”\textsuperscript{12} For her food is somewhat more than just something to fill your stomach with. It is seasoned with memory, something their far-away mothers made and something that connects her to her home. Her mother confronts the neighbours’ racism by putting herself above them with [...] “impeccable

\textsuperscript{12} Syal 26.
manner and warm social chit-chat”. She will only express her true self within the larger family.

Meena’s father was in his youth offered a film role but her grandfather refused to let him go. When Meena hears about that she feels disappointed and imagines how different her life could have been. “But if I was disappointed, I could not begin to imagine how papa must have felt.” Her father never talks about what he does for a living. All that Meena knows is that he works in an office. Her mother explains to her why they had left India [...] “we were poor and clever, a bad combination in India.”

Karim’s parents stand in great contrast to Meena’s. Karim’s father came to England, a spoilt aristocrat, sent there by his parents to become a doctor but ended up as an underpaid Civil Service clerk. “Dad had been in Britain since 1950 – over twenty years – and for fifteen of those years he’d lived in the South London suburbs.” But when he performs his mock guru sessions he comes to life and acts with confidence. Karim is somewhat puzzled by this change of direction in identity that his father has embarked on since [...] “he’d spent years trying to be more of an Englishman.” It seems as if he has become resigned, after half a life trying to fit in; “The whites will never promote us, Dad said. Not an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth.” Instead he decides to take on another role that also fits in with the stereotypical British view regarding a man from India. This role seems to give Haroon, Karim’s father, more freedom.

Karim asks himself what is happening to his father and to his father’s friend, Anwar, as he says; “For years they were both happy to live like Englishmen.” And

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13 Syal 90.
14 Syal 82.
15 Syal 112.
17 Kureishi 21.
18 Kureishi 27.
now Haroon comes across as what westerners would see as a stereotypical Eastern spiritual guide and Anwar resorts to a hunger strike in order to make his daughter marry the man he has chosen for her. Towards the end of the book Haroon makes the decision to leave his job and to teach, think and listen. “We old Indians come to like this England less and less and we return to an imagined India.”

Karim’s mum juggles life between her job in a shoe shop and all the domestic work “For Mum, life was fundamentally hell. You went blind, you got raped, people forgot your birthday, Nixon got elected, your husband fled with a blond from Beckenham, and then you got old, you couldn’t walk and you died.” She seems to have been going in the same footsteps for a long time without questioning her life situation. Her life falls to pieces when her husband decides to leave her.

### 2.2 Family identity

Karim’s family life is in stark contrast to that of Meena. When his father leaves his mother for Eva the whole family situation is in turmoil. “Our whole family was in tatters and no one was talking about it.” Karim goes with his father to live with Eva and her son Charlie. By doing so he feels as if he is betraying his mother and worries about how she is doing left there (in the old family home) with Karim’s younger brother Allie. Karim is torn between his new family identity, which is moving closer and closer to the city of London with the up and coming rock/punk singer Charlie and his identity as his mother’s son, which he has left in the suburb; […] “I had a real family to attend to”.

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19 Kureishi 74.
20 Kureishi 105.
21 Kureishi 55.
22 Kureishi 101.
Karim feels a lot of resentment towards his father for leaving his mother, “Mum’s wretchedness was the price Dad had chosen to pay for his happiness” \(^{23}\), but at the same time he admires him and feels that the new life that he has embarked on is exciting and can lead him towards what he wants for himself. After a while, however, Karim begins to see through his father, the novelty of the move begins to fade away and he sees him more for who he is and he begins to question his behavior. He no longer feels that he would like to be like him; “He’d let me down in some way.” \(^{24}\)

The emotional identity of Karim’s family is characterized by continuity, and subdued emotions. “In my family nervous breakdowns were as exotic as New Orleans.” \(^{25}\) This is especially true when it comes to Karim’s mother. Her identity is firmly connected to the little life between the home, her job and the suburb in which they live. When Karim’s father decides to leave the family it takes her some time to take on her new identity, even though it still is within the suburb. Karim suggests to his father that they should get divorced, but because of his suburban way of thinking that does not come into his mind in the first place. “But divorce wasn’t something that would occur to them. In the suburbs people rarely dreamed of striking out for happiness. It was all familiarity and endurance: security and safety were the reward of dullness.” \(^{26}\)

At Anwar’s funeral Karim reflects on his roots. “But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in some way these were my people, and I’d spent my life denying or avoiding that fact.” \(^{27}\) This makes Karim feel both ashamed and incomplete as if there is half of him that is missing and that he has

\(^{23}\) Kureishi 116.  
\(^{24}\) Kureishi 194.  
\(^{25}\) Kureishi 11.  
\(^{26}\) Kureishi 8.  
\(^{27}\) Kureishi 212.
been conspiring with the enemies, the whites who want him to be like them. Towards the end of the text according to the Literature Resource Center; “Karim finally realizes that he can be both English, like his mother, and Indian, like his father.”

Meena’s family is in many ways portrayed as the typical warm immigrant family where the door is always open; there is food on the stove and lot of relatives in and out of the house. But for Meena this is in many ways causing her embarrassment and makes her feel different. “My life was outside the home, with Anita, my passport to acceptance.” Meena feels as if her loyalties are divided, between her Indian friends who are her aunts’ children and her white English friends, such as Anita she chooses the latter before Pinky and Baby, whom she considers to be everything that she loathes e.g. pleasant, helpful, delicate and groomed.

Even though her parents are, to some extent, accepted in the community and lead a rather middleclass life they try to preserve their traditions. They are of course worried about the behaviour of Meena and the fact that she is questioning and rejecting their traditional lifestyle. “You see what happens to our girls here? Wanting to grow up so quickly and get boyfriends-shoyfriends… Isn’t childhood short enough, eh?”

Syal describes and stereotypes Meena’s aunts in the text as being; “plump, bosomy women with overactive gap-toothed mouths, fond of bright tight outfits accentuating every cherished roll and curve of flesh, bursting with optimism and unsolicited advice for everyone’s children, upon whose future they pinned all their unfulfilled desires.” Meena’s mother however, does not fit in to this somewhat stereotypical description. She is a soft spoken, slender and well educated woman.

29 Syal 148.
30 Syal 108.
31 Syal 110.
It is not until the arrival of her maternal grandmother that Meena gains a perspective on and appreciation of her family. “I vowed that I would never leave her, this wrenching of daughter from mother would never happen again.” The arrival of her grandmother means, that Meena’s self-confidence and independence grows.

2.3 Community and identity

James Procter, argues that; “For both Meena and Karim 'Black Britain' constitutes an exotic site/sight.” In Meena’s case, she is brought up in the small village of Tollington, where the only other “blacks” that she encounters are her relatives. This means that she lives a life far from the cosmopolitan blend that takes place in bigger cities. She therefore lacks the insight into what it is really like to be a part of that “black Britain”.

Karim has been brought up in a suburb of South London, and still, when asked to portray a “black” person for the play he is in, he struggles, since he does not know that many. Both Meena and Karim lack the experience of two different worlds that their parents have. Proctor says that in many respects they are both locals. Meena starts on a slow journey away from the village, Proctor argues that she “gradually detaches herself from her suburban locality, to take up the more familiar “in-between” position”. Meena does not feel that she can fit in either of the two worlds that she is struggling in between. “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

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34 Procter 142.
wench, but living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home.”

Procter argues that; “Kureishi’s protagonist is motivated by an anxious desire to purify himself of a provincial suburbanism that continues to haunt him.”

Karim still has great difficulties to cut away from the suburb, which is part of his identity as well as a security. “I knew it did me good to be reminded how much I loathed the suburbs, and that I had to continue my journey into London and a new life, ensuring I got away from people and streets like this.”

Even though he, like his stepmother Eva, aspires to escape away from that life, it turns out to be hard. One example is when Karim is asked by the director Shadwell to make changes to his role which will fit together with what is expected of a stereotypical Mowgli, he reacts with; “I wanted to run out of the room, back to South London, where I belonged, out of which I had wrongly and arrogantly stepped.”

This is a strong indicator of how he doubts his ability to move on and to fit in somewhere else. Kureishi talks about this difficulty, identity/class dilemma in *Dreaming and Scheming*; “Culture and art was for the other people, usually wealthy, self-sufficient people who were safe and established.”

Proctor argues, regarding Karim’s identity; “His unstable, hybrid identity is not simply a product of ethnicity (of being Indian and English), but of locality.”

This can also be said about Eva, who has a firm determination to get away from anything and everything that can be associated with the suburbs. Kureishi takes on a rather matter of fact attitude regarding this kind of journey; “She didn’t realize it was in the blood and not on the skin; she did not see there could be nothing more suburban than

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35 Syal 150.
36 Proctor 149.
37 Kureishi 101.
38 Kureishi 148.
40 Proctor 153.
suburbanites repudiating themselves." Kureishi himself illustrates this desire through his own experience “I wrote to become a writer and get away from the suburbs.”

Proctor states that; “Karim is a chameleon. Like Meena in Syal’s novel, he reinvents and repositions himself as black or white, as Asian or cockney as the situation suits him.” Nevertheless, it could be questioned how well Karim is able to position himself as coloured since the only thing he has experienced regarding this is highly influenced by the norms and expectations of the society in which he lives. The difficulty, according to Schoene-Harwood is said to be that: [...]” the postcolonial self’s identity is never at one with itself but invariably overlapping, multiply mirrored, blurred.” He argues that this hybridity is prone to disturb and weaken rather than making possible something good to come out of this fact. He also argues that a person with Karim’s and Meena’s background [...]“is continually at risk of becoming a solitary, freakishly shape-shifting nomad, haunted by rather than settled in culture.”

This must really depend on the place and the individual in question. Both Meena and Karim live in a country where people from all over the world have come to live and who are intermingled in everyday life, more or less. There must be a realistic opportunity for an individual to find their identity in such a society since they are not alone in living under such circumstances, with the background that they have. Schoene-Harwood argues further that; “In Meena’s case hybridity signifies a state of not being able to fully meet the standards of either culture.” He means that this is displayed through the difficulties that Meena has trying to switch between authentic

41 Kureishi 134.
42 Kureishi, Dreaming and Scheming. 13.
43 Proctor 153.
45 Schoene-Harwood 160.
46 Schoene-Harwood 161.
Indian and authentic Englishness. She [...] “rejects one culture for the other”\textsuperscript{47} is what Schoene-Harwood declares. This is quite clearly described in the text, where Meena goes from, at the beginning of the text doing everything to fit in with the English community to, at the end of the text doing what her parents expect of her. Schoene-Harwood argues that it is when Meena arrives at the Big House and discovers that, all along, there has been an Indian man living there with his French woman watching over her, her search for identity comes to an end. This means that she now is fully able to break herself off from Anita, Tracy and Sam. This can only be said to be one part of the truth since there are other important factors that have made it possible for Meena to move on and to grow a more solid identity than before. Those factors are the arrival of her grandmother and her stay at the hospital which, through time, distance and new love/friendship, gave her a chance to reflect and mature. When Meena gets back to the village from the hospital she has her eyes opened. “I never remember it all looking so shabby, so forgotten.”\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} Schoene-Harwood 162.
\textsuperscript{48} Syal 294.
3. Identity in relation to friends and education

3.1 Friends

For a young person, his/her identity is very much linked to their friends. It is nearly impossible for a person’s identity, while growing up, not to be influenced by the social environment where he/she exists. To be able to to some extent form/influence one’s identity experiences of other people, different surroundings are important. These factors can help an individual to mature and with that also mature and gain perspective on things in life such as who he/she is.

Meena is a very good example of a young girl who from the outset feels different and is prepared to do very much anything to achieve the identity of an English girl. Schoene-Harwood claims that Meena is doing almost anything to fit in: […] “Meena yearns to blend in with the cultural predictability of her drab Tollington background.”49 She despises everything that she and her family represent and is desperate to distance herself from that. According to Schoene-Harwood, Meena rejects one culture for the other. She feels unable to live in and combine the two. Meena gets to know the tough girl Anita Rutter, who is a few years older. Anita has not got a safe and secure home situation, is vulnerable and too mature and advanced for her age, and her own good. Brown argues that Meena, when looking for a friend resolutely seeks out the local equivalent of her own outsider status and: […]“follows those independent instincts into the most dangerous alliance she can manage.”50 Anita is the opposite of Meena’s Aunts’ well-behaved Indian girls, and is, according to Brown: […] “cheeky and irrelevant, boisterous, angry and casually

49 Schoene-Harwood 161.
50 Brown 9.
dishonest."\(^51\) Meena’s choice of best friend all ties in with her noncompliant behavior towards her own family. They form a gang, which they call Wenches Brigade. Meena idolizes Anita; “I was happy to follow her a respectable few paces behind, knowing that I was privileged to be in her company.”\(^52\) and is prepared to do anything to keep her friendship. Anita however, appears to be curious about Meena’s family and culture and is at one point invited to a family dinner. Meena then reflects on the fact that her parents eat with their hands and that she has: […] “never eaten Indian food in the presence of a white person before.”\(^53\) When Anita wants to see Meena’s room she is once again afraid not to fit in to the mould. But Anita is impressed and finds Meena’s traditional outfits […] “bosting”\(^54\). The days go by and Meena enjoys her new sense of belonging: […] “I’d been having the best day of my life being Anita’s new friend.”\(^55\)

As the time passes Meena begins to realize that the so-called friendship that they have might not be as genuine as she thinks. She feels more and more insecure and alienated from Anita and is afraid that she will turn on her: “I had seen how in an instant, those you called friends could suddenly become tormentors, sniffing out a weakness or a difference, turning their own fear of ostracism into a weapon with which they could beat the victim away, […]”.\(^56\) Schoene-Harwood states that Meena’s and Anita’s love/hate friendship is really a reflection of Meena’s own unresolved identity crisis as an English/Indian girl. Their friendship has a lifespan which is predicted by Meena’s own personal growth affecting her identity and thereby her need for Anita. Brown claims that “Foreign to each other but needy in their

\(^{51}\) Brown 9. 
\(^{52}\) Syal 38. 
\(^{53}\) Syal 254. 
\(^{54}\) Syal 256. www.urbandictionary.com bosting= good or great 
\(^{55}\) Syal 60. 
\(^{56}\) Syal 142.
different ways, the girls manage a kind of inequitable friendship that serves their needs for a few years.\textsuperscript{57} Their relationship works for both of them, for the moment, but in the long run it is doomed.

The final break-up from Anita begins to happen when Meena ends up in hospital. There she has time to think about her life, and what is important and she is able to see her life and future in perspective. She commences to study for her exam and meets Robert and he becomes her friend/boyfriend. Meena does not hear from Anita while she is in hospital. When she comes out from the hospital things have changed. Meena has gone through things, met Robert and matured. Schoene-Harwood states that: “It appears that, to become fully and freely herself, Meena must trace and exorcize her memory of Anita.”\textsuperscript{58} The event that finally puts an end to their friendship is when Meena witnesses Anita getting raped and abused by Sam (her boyfriend) by the pond in which Tracy, Anita’s sister falls in and nearly dies. When the police question her about what happened Meena takes the final step in distancing herself from Anita: “Anita and I had never been meant for each other: Sam and Anita, Anita and Sam, it sounded as natural as breathing.”\textsuperscript{59} Meena is now ready to move on and Anita has lost the power over her and she no longer cares about her or wants to be with her: […]”I don’t give a toss what your sister does, Tracy. You can tell her that from me.”\textsuperscript{60}

Karim also goes through a similar identity evolution through his friend Charlie and his mother Eva and other people that he meets, firstly in the suburb in South London and then while moving closer to the centre of London, and particularly in the spheres of the theatre. At first Karim does not have that much of a perspective on

\textsuperscript{57} Brown 9.  
\textsuperscript{58} Schoene-Harwood 165.  
\textsuperscript{59} Syal 282.  
\textsuperscript{60} Syal 301.
friendship, he simply wants to be like Charlie: “[...]”my love for him was unusual as love goes: it was not generous. I admired him more than anyone but I didn't wish him well. It was that I preferred him to me and wanted to be him.” For Karim, Charlie as well as the move away from the suburb is a stepping-stone for the formation of his identity. It is Eva, Charlie's mother and Haroon’s lover that makes this possible for Karim. “Eva was unfolding the world for me. It was through her that I became interested in life.”

Another person who plays an important part in the formation of Karim’s identity is his childhood friend Jamila. She is a strong feminist: “Compared to Jammie I was, as a militant, a real shaker and trembler”, whom is forced into an arranged marriage by her father but who still goes her own way, refusing to conform. Karim’s identity as a friend is put through the test by himself on two major occasions; the first time is when he sleeps with Jamila, thereby letting his new friend Changez, her husband, down: “[...]”I’d betrayed everyone – Changez, Mum and Dad, and myself”. The second time is when he gives Changez his word of honour that he will not use him as a character in the play and still does. These are incidents that cause great conflict in loyalties as well as identity within Karim. His newfound self does not always go that well together with his past and background.

When Karim visits Charlie in America it creates yet another perspective regarding his identity. “We were two English boys in America, [...]” is how he then sees himself and Charlie when in New York. Charlie takes good care of Karim and wants him to stay on with him in New York. At first this is appealing to Karim but time shows that Karim is ready to break away from Charlie and establish his own

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61 Kureishi 15.
62 Kureishi 87.
63 Kureishi 53.
64 Kureishi 109.
65 Kureishi 249.
independent identity in England. He is no longer as needy and impressed by Charlie as he used to be. As an actor, he is more secure in his identity and is able to break away from Charlie. "I didn’t care either for or about him. He didn’t interest me at all. I’d moved beyond him, discovering myself through what I rejected."66

Both Karim and Meena leave their childhood friends and move on to form their own and more independent identities.

3.2 School
For Karim school is not something that is important. It is a battleground to which he is exposed everyday, where both teachers and other pupils are threatening: "Every day I considered myself lucky to get home from school without serious injury."67 At school his identity is that of one in a large group, not as a capable individual. "Recently I’d been punched and kicked to the ground by a teacher because I called him a queer."68

He does not have high hopes when it comes to his studies; he merely fulfils what is expected of him as a son of lower class parents, with an immigrant background, living in the suburbs. "We did a lot of woodwork at the school because they didn’t think we could deal with books."69 He does not expect himself to pass, for example, his A-levels: "But whatever happened I knew I would fail them. I was too concerned with other things."70 For Karim, school is not something that will lead him on to new and better things. These opportunities he expects to find elsewhere.

Karim’s father wants him to become a doctor but Karim has other aspirations: “I didn’t want to be educated. It wasn’t the right time of my life for concentration, it

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66 Kureishi 255.
67 Kureishi 63.
68 Kureishi 62.
69 Kureishi 62.
70 Kureishi 63.
really wasn’t.”71 It seems as if his father does not have the authority to place any demands on Karim since he himself failed his studies. Still, his father is very upset when Karim fails all his exams. But Karim’s view is that he has had enough of school and that it is not something for him. “In the suburbs education wasn’t considered a particular advantage, and certainly couldn’t be seen as worthwhile in itself.”72

Instead, Karim is encouraged to pursue his dreams of becoming an actor by Eva, who also prepares him for an audition. He then combines acting with “hands on education” given to him by the directors and theatre companies that he becomes a part of.

For Meena ending up in hospital affects her views on friendships as well as education. If the accident had not taken place it is highly likely that it would have taken her longer to mature and form her new identity and that would have had serious impacts on her results in school. The eleven plus test, which lies in the near future, when she breaks her leg, will decide the future for the Tollington children. The test will determine whether or not they will be able to attend the grammar school twenty miles away, which is highly unlikely, or the comprehensive in the next town. The maturity that Meena has gained makes her see the importance of that test: “If I failed, my parents’ five thousand mile journey would have all been for nothing.”73 By taking the test and succeeding she is doing the unexpected and will be able to, through the distance in miles and through meeting new people, mature even further and establish her identity.

71 Kureishi 94.
72 Kureishi 177.
73 Syal 213.
4.1 How prejudice is dealt with

According to the author Salman Rushdie, […] “Britain is undergoing a critical phase of its postcolonial period”, a kind of crisis affecting the whole society in a number of ways and racism is only the most visible part of this crisis, which Rushdie claims can work as an iceberg, an iceberg that can sink ships. Karim is very much a product of this unstable society. Racism is part of his daily life and he tries to deal with it in different ways, all which have an impact on his identity. According to Procter: “Karim shuttles between identities, positions and politics without even firmly committing or attaching himself to any.”74 Karim feels the expectations from the English to be and act as an Englishman, but even when he tries, he still feels rejected and not accepted: […] “to the English we were always wogs and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it.”75 When Karim puts on ethnic looking clothes and goes with his father, who performs guru sessions, he gets positive comments from Eva who approves of him looking exotic and original. Through these sessions Karim’s father, Haroon, is given another, new identity, in which he feels appreciated and confident. Proctor states that both father and son, as the guru and as Mowgli, are made to perform as authentic Indians even though the text suggests that such representations exist only as an act, a staged identity. Karim is somewhat puzzled by his father’s changed approach. He overhears him speaking to himself in a slow and much deeper voice 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 spadefuls. Why?”76 It is quite evident throughout the text that Haroon has so far done everything that the English society has expected of him without achieving the

74 Procter 154.
75 Kureishi 53.
76 Kureishi 21.
success and the status he rightly deserves. Karim’s aunt Jean and uncle Ted call Haroon Harry. “It was bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too. They’d called Dad Harry from the first time they’d met him, and there was nothing Dad could do about it. So he called them ‘Gin and Tonic’. ”77 So now he decides to take on another approach.

Karim has a relationship with an “English” girl, Helen. Her father does not approve of them seeing each other. He tells Karim straight to his face that: “ ‘She doesn’t go out with boys. Or with wogs.’”78 and that: “ ‘We don’t want you blackies coming to the house.’”79 Karim gets his retribution when Helen drives them to pick up Changez from the airport:

This was a delicious moment of revenge for me, because the Rover belonged to Helen’s dad, Hairy Back. Had he known that four Pakis were resting their dark arses on his deep leather seats, ready to be driven by his daughter, who had only recently been fucked by one of them, he wouldn’t have been a contented man.80

Karim tries to live his life as a part of English society but is time after time reminded that he is not fully accepted as a part of that society. It is also clear that the English people he comes across are really keen to place him in a stereotypical role, that is as an Indian. This is a role that, according to the English has a certain content, which they have decided to be the appropriate and right one, and which is something that makes them comfortable. Karim is made to consider his role and identity in English society because of the racism that he encounters frequently. “We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. But to be truly free we had to free ourselves

77 Kureishi 33.
78 Kureishi 40.
79 Kureishi 40.
80 Kureishi 78.
of all bitterness and resentment, too. How was this possible when bitterness and
resentment were generated afresh every day?"\textsuperscript{81}

Karim is given a part in a play; he is supposed to come up with the character
himself, a portrait of a black person. He finds this hard since he does not know that
many but finally decides to borrow some traits from Anwar which means that he plays
an immigrant who has just arrived from a small Indian town:

“I insisted on assembling the costume myself: […] I wore high white platform boots,
wide cherry flares that stuck to my arse like sweetpaper and flapped around my
ankles, and a spotted shirt with a wide ‘Concorde’ collar flattened over my jacket
lapels.”\textsuperscript{82} Tracy, a black girl also a member of the theatre company is very upset by
Karim’s character, which she finds offensive and stereotypical:

Your picture is what white people already think of us. That we
are 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. […]
Do you hate yourself and all black people so much, Karim?\textsuperscript{83}

Proctor claims that a positive representation of a black person is necessary since the
opportunities for doing so are limited and that is what Tracy is trying to make Karim
understand. It seems as if Karim is totally unaware of this fact or does not care.
Furthermore Proctor argues that the reason why Karim accepts the part in a soap
opera, dealing with contemporary issues such as abortions and racial attacks, are
personal rather than political. He states that: “Karim is a Chameleon. Like Meena in
Syal’s novel, he reinvents and repositions himself as black or white, Asian or cockney

\textsuperscript{81} Kureishi 227.
\textsuperscript{82} Kureishi 220.
\textsuperscript{83} Kureishi 180.
as the situation suits him.” Furthermore both Karim and Meena are therefore not simply victims of their ethnicity they also keenly use it to their advantage.

Meena tries to reinvent her life and her past in order to make herself more interesting and in some sense to fit the stereotype. She is very much the opposite of her mother, who has managed quite well to find her Indian/English identity and is upset by Meena’s lies. It seems as if racism is a much greater problem for Meena since she does not feel that she belongs wholly to the English or the Indian identity. She cannot identify herself or her family with: [...] “the barely literate, perpetually grinning idiots I occasionally saw in TV comedies, or the confused, helpless innocents I spotted in bus and supermarket queues”. She has the need to exploit her situation, to challenge and to test boundaries in order to find herself. It is by doing so that she comes across racism and narrow-mindedness and has to deal with that. She makes up a wonderful story about the hardships that her yet innocent parents went through during their first time in England. She tells her friends when they play in the park that she: [...]”was a Punjabi princess and owned an elephant called Jason King,” and at school she uses her Indianness as an excuse: [...]”I hadn’t completed my homework because of an obscure religious festival involving fire eating…” Proctor argues that: “Meena is an unreliable story-teller and a self-confessed liar who uses stories and mythology to feel complete and to belong.” It could be argued that Meena, like Karim, is someone who is prepared to exploit her ethnicity to achieve her goals. She basically wants to be someone, popular and admired. She really gets the chance to make use of her talent when her grandmother comes to visit. Meena makes up a story that her grandmother speaks several languages: “‘Oh, she does

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84 Procter 153.  
85 Syal 216.  
86 Syal 28.  
87 Syal 28.  
88 Proctor 137.
speak English,´ I piped up, ´and French, Russian and a bit of Latin. But she’s really shy, an´ she’s got a bit of a sore throat at the moment…´ […] and Meena explains that her grandmother makes money by looking for gold and that her biggest mine was recently destroyed by a volcano. The villagers are amazed, but they buy the story which seems, to their preconceived understanding of Indian people, to be highly likely. Meena even takes some glass stones and costume jewels, to show them.

Braidotti claims that: […]" it is much easier for Europeans to address social questions related to far away places, than to stare at the problems in our own backyard."90This seems to be one of the reasons why racism is such a big issue. It is easier for the villages to be amazed and impressed by Meena’s grandmother whom they know is only there for a visit but it might be a different matter if she was to move there permanently. Both Karim’s and Meena’s families experience that they are accepted when they recognize the particular role given to them, that is as a separate part of the society, representing the exotic but at a distance. It is when they challenge the roles given to them by the society, by trying to create their own space and identity within English society that the English feel threatened. Rushdie addresses this issue by asking the question: “What does it mean to be Indian outside India?”91

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89 Syal 220.
90 Braidotti 23.
91 Rushdie 17.
4.2 Dreams about the future

When Karim meets Charlie, Eva’s son, he experiences a major revelation about his future:

I could see my life clearly for the first time: the future and what I wanted to do. I wanted to live always this intensely: mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs. I hadn’t come upon it all like this before, and now I wanted nothing else. The door to the future had opened: I could see which way to go.92

His experiences with Charlie and Eva are important and open doors to his future away from the suburbs. In the text the suburb represents a closed community with little or no opportunities which everyone, who can, will try to get away from. Charlie and Karim go to the same school as David Bowie once went to and there is a photo of him in the dining hall, working almost as a shrine, to which boys pray and hope to “[…] be made into pop stars and for release from a lifetime as a motormechanic, or a clerk in an insurance firm, or a junior architect.”93 Even though everyone dreams about an escape away from their suburban destiny they do not hold any high expectations of this: “[…] we had a combination of miserable expectations and wild hopes. Myself, I had only wild hopes.”94 Karim’s move from the suburb to the city has a major effect on the development of his future identity. It works as an eye opener, even though he finds it hard to grasp all the possibilities that there are, which means that he still feels insecure about his future: “I still had no idea what I was going to do. I felt directionless and lost in the crowd. I couldn’t yet see how the city worked, but I began to find out.”95

Karim starts out, in the text, searching for his place and future identity and it is through the people that he meets and experiences he has that he begins to shape
his future path. “Whatever fear of the future I had, I would overcome it; it was nothing to my loathing of the past.”\textsuperscript{96} Karim is someone who considers both his own, and others attitudes regarding the future. It seems as if he, by doing just that, is able to find his place more easily:

Watching Jamila sometimes made me think the world was divided into three sorts of people: those who knew what they wanted to do; those (the unhappiest) who never knew what their purpose in life was; and those who found out later on. I was in the last category, I reckoned, which didn't stop me wishing I'd been born into the first.\textsuperscript{97}

At the end of the text Karim has been through a lot and has now established himself as an actor. He has been given a part in a soap opera and reflects upon what he has been through up to this point: “I could think about the past and what I’d been through as I’d struggled to locate myself and learn what the heart is. Perhaps in the future I would live more deeply.”\textsuperscript{98} It is not only a reflection about his professional life but also one, which involves his emotional development.

At the beginning of the text Meena is simply looking for excitement, wanting just about anything to happen to her, as long as it breaks her mundane life. She is far from content: “Was this all there was? When would anything dangerous and cruel ever happen to me?”\textsuperscript{99} Meena starts to dream about how she might be able to create that exciting life that she wants. She tries to find some kind of escape route away from Tollington. When watching her favourite programme “Opportunity Knocks”\textsuperscript{100} she sees a possibility to realize her dreams: “From the first time I watched the show, I knew that this could be my most realistic escape route from Tollington, from ordinary girl to major personality in one easy step.”\textsuperscript{101} Together with Anita, who also wants to

\textsuperscript{96} Kureishi 145.
\textsuperscript{97} Kureishi 95.
\textsuperscript{98} Kureishi 284.
\textsuperscript{99} Syal 37.
\textsuperscript{100} Syal 64.
\textsuperscript{101} Syal 65.
get away from the village, Meena explores the prospects of something else. When they have stolen the collection box from the local shop Anita suggests that they could get a ticket and go to London: “‘We could just get up now and go to London and no one would ever see us again’. “102

Schoene-Harwood argues that it is when Meena ends up in hospital that a major change within her takes place which will greatly influence her future: “I decided there and then to heal myself, both in body and mind.”103 When Meena comes out of the hospital she is changed, mature, independent and more focused on herself and her future: “I spent a lot of time on my own that year.”104 She is prepared to leave her old life behind and embrace the new: “My days as a yard member were over.”105 Schoene-Harwood claims that Meena then switches from her whole-hearted attempt to be English to [...] “re-embrace her Indian “otherness”, thereby unwittingly internalizing the dynamic of discriminatory stereotyping and, more significantly, mistaking these dynamics for processes of genuine cultural self-authentication.”106, when she then turns into the cliché of a good Indian girl.

When she almost misses her exam, she feels as if the possible positive and life changing future prospects that she has within reach are about to disintegrate. This is something that she now sees as very important: “I saw everything crumble around me, every single daydream of wandering through the grammar school [...]”

102 Syal 155.
103 Syal 284.
104 Syal 297.
105 Syal 297.
106 Schoene-Harwood 163.
Schoene-Harwood argues that: “The ending of the novel is markedly optimistic.”

Syal 321.

Schoene-Harwood 166.
Conclusions

This essay has dealt with how a person’s identity is formed in the multicultural British society in the texts *Anita and Me*, by Meera Syal and in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, by Hanif Kureishi. Chapter one developed and discussed what identity is, how a person’s identity is evolved and the different circumstances that can influence identity formation. Chapter two dealt with how community, parents’ identity and family, influence the identity of a young person. Chapter three discussed how friends and school might influence identity. The final chapter dealt with how prejudice affects identity, and how the two main characters, in the two texts, plan/dream about their future and identity.

For some people their identity is not something that they think twice about. But for others, such as Meena and Karim, the question of identity is important and not something to be taken for granted. For them, identity is a constant source for questions about themselves, their present and their future. They try and test boundaries, prejudice and tradition. Struggling with dual ethnic backgrounds, both Karim and Meena are searching for something new, away from the norm, their parents and what society expects of them. They strive towards individuality and individual freedom to evolve their true selves.

*The Buddha of Suburbia* as well as *Anita and Me* presents an insight into the development of a young person’s identity, someone with an immigrant background, growing up in England. The two texts can be regarded simply as an account of just that or seen as a female/male version of identity formation. Both Karim and Meena desire to escape and to find excitement beyond what they know and are. Karim wants to break loose from the suburb and Meena from her Indian traditions as well as the village of Tollington.
In the text Syal gives a realistic account of the various aspects that a girl with Meena’s background and circumstances may encounter while trying to find her identity. Syal does not shy away from the ugliness that real life sometimes presents or the complexities that her protagonist experiences. The text reveals how Meena, through her extrovert, experimental lifestyle is made to mature and to choose sides. By making her do just that Syal signals that there are no other options, or easy solutions for Meena, if she is to evolve her factual self. It is evident in the text that life in northern England still requires a person to accept their place and identity, which is to a large extent based on tradition and prejudice.

Kureishi can also be said to give a rather realistic account of identity formation. He does, however, take a more humoristic and optimistic approach to Karim’s destiny and thereby his identity. It feels as if Kureishi, by making Karim successful, wants to create a positive example as proof that a change has, and is, taking place in British society and that the individual now has more freedom and choice in evolving his/her true self, than used to be possible. The author’s desire for his protagonist to be a success and to break the negative norm sometimes makes Karim somewhat unrealistically drawn as a character, and creates a distance between him and the other and more realistic characters in the text.

Both Meena and Karim grow and go forward in their identity through their desire to look elsewhere and to achieve something for themselves away from where they first start out (the village and the suburb). However it is through the encounters that they have with other people, where they are confronted with other peoples’ views and in which they can mirror themselves, that they are able to grow in identity. These revelations make them more secure about what to choose for themselves, their place and future. This might be more true when it comes to Karim than Meena. She seems,
at the end of the text, to have thrown herself from one extreme identity experience to another and it feels as if it might be some time before she is able to strike the right balance and locate her true self.
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