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Decentralising Postcolonial Readings of South Asian British Novels

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**Absent Readers:
Decentralising Postcolonial Readings of
South Asian British Novels**

by
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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis looks at how South Asian British novels and their modes of reception, both in and outside academia, reveal the complexities of a category of literary consumers called ‘postcolonial readers’, that is, readers of postcolonial texts who may not be able to make their voices heard in metropolitan academia. Inspired by the burgeoning turn to reception studies within the field of postcolonial literary studies, it enquires into ways in which the ‘absent’ readers of the debut novels of Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal, Hari Kunzru and Monica Ali nuance assumptions about the white metropolitan readership of postcolonial literature held by both materialist and poststructuralist critics in the field. As an academic from such a peripheral site of reception as Thailand, I consider an attention to non-metropolitan readers as a necessary step towards a decentralised interpretive framework of postcolonial criticism, institutionalised at the metropolitan literary centres and circulated globally through the English departments in universities around the world. Nonetheless, rather than dismissing altogether the properties *within* a postcolonial text to focus solely on the responses of its actual readers, I argue that the form and content of these texts resonate with readers from different social and cultural positions in different ways, and thus offer possibilities for the peripheral readers, not yet recognised in the existing modes of scholarly reading, to be imagined. As will be revealed in the first four chapters, shifting the focus from the worldview of each novel’s protagonist to the totality of the world in which s/he lives could render visible the system of unequal relations that readers from a variety of backgrounds could actively engage with. The penultimate chapter provides an account of the actual reading of Kureishi’s novel in a specific classroom context in Thailand to exemplify the influence that the reading framework at the centres has on the peripheral readers, and suggests a contextualised pedagogical model concerning the reading of the four novels under study as an alternative to it.

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Sutida Wimuttikosol, 26 September 2017

Introduction

From metropolitan to peripheral readers: A case against interpretive exclusivity

The genuinely profound scholarship of the people who believed in and practiced *Weltliteratur* implied the extraordinary privilege of an observer located in the West who could actually survey the world's literary output with a kind of sovereign detachment.¹

[The domination exercised by the powerful] is a domination that is recognized and accepted by outsiders while remaining wholly unknown to the inhabitants of the centers, who are also (and especially) unaware of their role in producing literary time and its associated unit of historical measure.²

In *Culture and imperialism*, Edward Said associates the study of world literature with the exclusive power of the 'observer', whose location is in the 'West', to 'survey' literary production around the world. Pascale Casanova, seeing the unequal relations in the world's literary system from the centre/periphery perspective, also talks about the power of the 'centers', the majority of whose inhabitants belong to Said's category of the 'West', in producing and controlling the 'central time' of 'the world republic of letters'. Together, they provide an insight into the reality of the world's literary production and consumption. Those at the centres, consciously or not, dominate global literary activities, being both the reference points for the 'outsiders' who aspire to get 'inside' and the surveyors who have the liberty to go 'outside' to discover the hidden literary treasure whose value they measure. It might therefore seem reasonable to assume that postcolonial texts, written at the margins of the Anglophone literary centres, namely the UK and the US, has the educated white middle-class metropolitans, who occupy central positions within such centres, as target readers. This demographic of readership has both economic and cultural capital that often determines the success and failure of literary works, especially in the marketplace. It is also understandable that postcolonial academics have been particularly concerned with the issue of reception at the centres, whether commercial or academic³, since it is evidently fraught with unequal power relations. However, as I will discuss in more detail in this introduction, the assumption of white metropolitan readership reproduces the static binary between the observer and the observed in the politics of

¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 48.

² Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 94.

³ See, for examples, Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), *A Black British Canon?*, ed. by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies (New York: Springer, 2006), and *Indian Writing in English and the Global Literary Market*, ed. by Om Prakash Dwivedi and Lisa Lau (New York: Springer, 2014).

representation. This binary not only affects the ways postcolonial critics approach texts, but also limits the potential engagement that readers who are unrecognised by both the market and the academy could have with these texts. To undermine this binary, we need to approach world literature and postcolonial literature without taking the identity of its readers for granted. Instead of asking what the criteria for the ‘good’ world/postcolonial literature are, or how to read this body of texts responsibly from the point of view at the centre, I argue that it is necessary to shift attention to the potential readers and readings that the texts make available, hitherto limited partly by the academic institution, which, according to Said, plays an active role in the legitimisation of Eurocentric literary surveys in the name of scholarly practice.

My thesis explores the following questions: to whom does a particular ‘postcolonial’ text speak? Who is included as its readers and who is not? How does the act of scholarly reading reveal the hierarchy of readership? How do professional readers at the literary metropolises read the texts, and what is the impact of this reading on the world’s literary community? How does postcolonial theory shape the way in which readers, both inside and outside academia, and both at the centre and the periphery of the world’s literary system, receive the text? What are possible ways to account for the ‘absent’ readers and develop a reading framework that render them visible? And, finally, if a reading of postcolonial or world literature could give an insight into the material world of unequal relations, how could we promote such a reading, especially to those whose lives are affected most by inequality? To answer these questions, I inquire into two interlinked types of *peripheral* readership, the implied readers and the actual readers, of four contemporary South Asian British novels: Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* (1996), Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist* (2002), and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003). By *peripheral* I thus mean both the perspectives that are not central to the texts, and the particular groups of people who, due to the ways in which the narratives are laid out and received in interpretive communities at the literary centres, may not be recognised or recognise themselves as readers. This peripherality should not be seen exclusively in terms of race or ethnicity, but in its intersectional relations to the centres in the context of postcolonial literary reception. The minority readers of Black British writings, for example, could be historically seen as peripheral readers, but some of them, especially those with certain cultural capital, have by now become an integral part of the texts’ institutionalisation, hence no longer *peripheral* in this sense. In the wider global context, similarly, the global elite who could come from any corner of the world share with the centres the cultural capital that may not be available for the local middle-

class and working-class in peripheral or semi-peripheral countries. This cosmopolitan demographic is thus not *peripheral*, even though its members' physical locations are outside the centres. By contrast, white working-class perspectives may not be recognised either in the texts or in interpretive communities even though they are among the numerical 'majority' at such a literary centre as Britain, presumably because they are economically and culturally *peripheral*.

In rendering visible these peripheral readers that are by no means homogenous, I suggest we move away from the theme of racial politics to the intersectional articulation of unequal relations both in the texts and at the sites of reception. While the fictional characters illustrate tensions between class, race and gender, the ways in which the texts are received by different interpretative communities also reveal such tensions in the literary field. In addition, although postcolonial theory, with all its nuances supplied by post-structuralist and Marxist critics, is undoubtedly useful and indeed informs me in my readings of the chosen texts, the implications it has upon readers with different degrees of cultural and literary literacy also need to be scrutinised. The implied readers of each text under study indicate both its limitations and its potential to transcend the postcolonial reading framework. I discuss these hypothetical readers together with the book's existing reception, mainly in the academic context both within and outside Britain, in order to examine who is tacitly included as a reader and who is not. I then demonstrate how the issue of readership itself is a manifestation of unequal relations that could be undermined through a reading that incorporates the voices of the *peripheral* readers or make visible the *absent* readers. Since this last point is based on the assumption that such readers actually exist, I follow the analyses of the novels with a case study in Thailand, providing an observational account of peripheral readers, both to the Anglophone literary marketplace and in postcolonial literary field, in a classroom context. The Thai students' reading of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* illustrates the limitations of the local application of postcolonial theory, as well as the potentials of postcolonial texts to resonate with the experiences of people who nominally avoided European colonialism. I then use the four texts discussed in the earlier chapters to formulate my proposal for an alternative reading in this specific context.

South Asian British novels and their 'absent' readers

By naming the four novels I examine in this thesis collectively as South Asian British literature, I intend to emphasise the two kinds of identity, ethnicity and nationality, that condition their authors' literary trajectories and the reception of their work. Except for

Monica Ali who was born in Dhaka and moved to England when she was a toddler, the other three authors, Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal, and Hari Kunzru are British-born, and all were raised in England. At the same time, each has at least one parent who is originally from the Indian subcontinent, namely Bangladesh (Ali), Pakistan (Kureishi) and India (Syal and Kunzru). The conflicting senses of belonging and not belonging to either the 'home' or the 'host' countries thus mark the distinctiveness of these authors, as well as others of their generation. As Ruvani Ranasinha points out, 'Kureishi and Syal differ from and enlarge the space created for them by their forerunners by articulating what it is like to feel British, grow up in Britain, and be regarded as foreign'.⁴ Yet, despite their shared experiences as second-generation British Asian writers, their different moments of arrival on the British literary scene—Kureishi and Syal in the 1990s and Kunzru and Ali in the early 2000s—affect the formation as much as the reception of their works. Roughly speaking, the first two were seen to engage in 'a redefining of "British-ness"' in their early literary career during the 1980s and 1990s, and thus were confronted with the politics of representation in a more immediate way than the latter two.⁵ With or against their wills, Kureishi and Syal 'represented' their minority communities that contributed to the new Britishness in their semi-autobiographical debut novels. By contrast, Kunzru and Ali had witnessed the consolidation of 'multicultural' Britain and seen quite a few examples of successful South Asian British authors before writing their first books. Both were included in the 2003 list of *Granta* Best of Young British Novelists, the same honour that was conferred upon Kureishi ten years earlier; in addition, they received a substantial advance for their debut novels, were apparently less constrained by the burden of representation than their precursors, and were seen to have more creative freedom. Ali narrates parallel contemporary lives in two countries in the realist tradition while Kunzru writes a historical novel in a postmodernist style. Both works are remotely related to its author's personal history and thus unlikely to be autobiographical. Therefore, although all four novels engage with the broad themes of self-formation and social and cultural alienation directly related to the authors' ethnicity, differences in the conditions in which each author published his/her work complicate the issue of reception that forms the basis of my discussions of the novels in chapter 1-4.

As an academic from Thailand, a Southeast Asian country whose dominant culture is rooted in India's classical literature and religious beliefs, I find it quite peculiar

⁴ Ruvani Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 223.

⁵ Ranasinha, p. 13.

that Indian writings in English and South Asian British writings are rarely read in the country, even in the English department. From my experiences as an undergraduate in the early 2000s, English literature and culture in the Thai classroom was indisputably ‘white’; It was hard to imagine either an Indian or an Arab walking on London’s streets, let alone writing what could be called ‘literature’. In other words, the new ‘Britishness’ had not travelled to the English literature classroom in Thailand then, and as the current curricula of major universities there show, probably has not now. The three oldest and arguably most prestigious ones have only one optional module focusing on postcolonial/world literature in their curricula.⁶ Thus, the ambivalent position of South Asian British texts, written from a relatively marginal location but by now having occupied quite a solid ground within the world literary centre of Britain, ignited my initial interest about the distance between postcolonial texts at the centre and postcolonial readers at the periphery. The debates around the politics of representation, which include the issue of authors’ authenticity, only added to my sense of being excluded as neither the white metropolitan reader nor the ‘represented’ who belongs to a particular ethnic community with a history of colonisation. Tabish Khair, for example, points out the historical errors in Zadie Smith and Yann Martel’s novels and comments on how the uncritical celebration of multiculturalism marks the ‘death of the reader’ who is supposed to be able to ‘fill the gaps, smooth the rough patches, justify the “errors”, “authenticise” the fiction’.⁷ Valid as it is, the criticism clearly assumes the authoritative role of the insider, as opposed to ‘the First World reader’.⁸ The narrative formations of the implied readers and the ways in which the novels under study are received in and outside metropolitan academia, however, reveal nuances of the category of ‘postcolonial readers’ which cannot be understood only in terms of geographical disparity as I first assumed. *The Buddha of Suburbia*, consciously staging ‘exotic’ self-commodification, anticipates different responses from audiences with different cultural backgrounds and political orientations. *Anita and Me*, selected as a set text for the GCSE examination in Britain, generates a body of scholarly reception that might resonate with the readers who identify more with Britain’s ethnic diversity than with its class divisions. *The Impressionist*, clearly influenced by such theoretical concepts as hybridity and nomadism, appears to put some

⁶ See the current online curricula at Anon., ‘Chulalongkorn University’, <<https://www.arts.chula.ac.th/02program/bachelor57.html>> [accessed 27 August 2017]; Anon., ‘Thammasat University’, <<http://web.reg.tu.ac.th/registrar/home.asp?pageid=42>> [accessed 27 August 2017]; Anon., ‘Kasetsart University’, <http://lit.human.ku.ac.th/_2012/2554/new_course_2555_edit_25_june.pdf> [accessed 27 August 2017].

⁷ Tabish Khair, ‘The Death of the Reader’, *Wasafiri*, 21.3 (2006), 1-5 (p. 2).

⁸ Khair, p. 3.

general readers off. Finally, *Brick Lane* was warmly welcomed by some female readers, skeptically viewed by many literary academics and protested against by mostly male members of Bangladeshi communities in London. Through close analysis of these novels, I draw a profile of the ‘absent’ reader that is by no means a definite category. She could be a reader whose affiliation to the working-class obstructs her from reading *Anita and Me* as a celebration of cultural differences, or an immigrant in Britain who has ‘mixed’ origins like *The Impressionist*’s protagonist but cannot identify with his total freedom of movement.

At the heart of this thesis is the belief that a literary text should not be prevented by any external meaning-making agents from reaching its potential audience. Postcolonial literature engages with the history of European colonialism as a global phenomenon. The particularity of the colonial and postcolonial experiences of authors and their characters can be understood as an instance of systemic oppression and intersectional inequality that any reader, especially those at the social and economic peripheries, could identify with, even though they do not share the same histories or origins. If we agree that the rationale behind postcolonial literary studies is the belief that ‘the world looks very different from the peripheries than it does from the metropole’, then such difference should as well be realised and tested against the experiences of those at the economic and/or geographical peripheries.⁹ Therefore, I regard it as a vital task of literary academics to facilitate this convergence between postcolonial writers and readers from different parts of the globe, not to obstruct it by means of their theoretical framework.

While the thesis’ chapters of textual analysis try to make recognisable the marginalised readers implied by the texts, the case study chapter addresses the peripheral readers in the global literary field *outside* the texts. That is, by observing a postcolonial literature class in Thailand, I seek to understand how a postcolonial text, in this case *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is received in an academic context at a peripheral site of reception. The historical specificity of Thailand’s ‘independence’, that is, its success in escaping official colonisation, makes it an even more challenging case for an inspection of the influence of postcolonial theoretical framework once it is appropriated locally. The Thais are apparently not affected by global migration or racial discrimination on a daily basis, and are unlikely to identify with the racial issues in the South Asian British novels. For this reason, Thailand could be a space where postcolonial interpretation that is premised

⁹ Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 18.

upon the coloniser/colonised and consumer/consumable binaries is problematised, since it could limit the way in which readers relate to the texts. At the same time, postcolonial literature could be proved in this overlooked context to register the unequal relations between the powerful and the powerless in both local and global scales beyond such binaries. A focus on writings by the diaspora writers in the UK may be viewed by some postcolonial academics as emphasising the centrality of the metropolitan marketplace; yet, my choice of less established texts that are virtually unknown in Thailand marks the distinction between Britain as a site of literary production and as a site of literary canonisation.¹⁰ While it might be true that works of the diaspora have a better chance of reaching the wider global audience via their publication at the literary centres, they are not automatically granted the canonical status that writings from the previous colonies such as Arundhati Roy's Booker winner *The God of Small Things* (1996) is endowed with.¹¹ Further, I place these novels within the category of postcolonial literature for their thematic focus on the experiences of those deemed racially inferior as a result of European colonialism, but I contend that an over-reliance on postcolonial literary criticism could limit rather than enhance the potential of these works to engage the wider audience beyond the field of postcolonial studies at the metropolises. Although there is no one way to approach a text, bearing in mind Thailand's socio-ideological context, I maintain that a materialist reading of postcolonial literature's intersectional articulation of the social reality could benefit each reader or group of readers from particular social, cultural and geographical locations in a distinct way. My account of the Thai students' responses to Kureishi's novel evidences the necessity of such a contextualised reading which would yield different kinds of textual engagement in different contexts.

Marxist reading and the aura of academic exclusivity

Today courses in post-1945 'English' literature that ignore 'minority' or 'postcolonial' writers and the issues of decolonization, migration, and diaspora are simply anachronistic.¹²

¹⁰ Except for *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which has been a subject of inquiry of prominent academics such as Bart Moore-Gilbert and Graham Huggan. Kureishi himself is mentioned alongside Amitav Ghosh and Caryl Phillips as 'diaspora writers' whose works are 'immensely popular in Western literary criticism' in John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 208. However, the novel has never been translated into Thai, and presumably never reached the general public.

¹¹ *The God of Small Things* was translated into Thai in 2007.

¹² Neil Lazarus, 'Introducing Postcolonial Studies' in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. by Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1–16 (p. 14).

It has been over a decade since Neil Lazarus remarked in the introductory chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* that postcolonial studies had become an institutionalised subject in the English department, particularly in British and American universities.¹³ The primary focus of the subject, ‘decolonization, migration, and diaspora’, seems to suggest the *aftermath* of colonisation rather than its continuation. The word ‘anachronistic’ hints that the inclusion of ‘minority’ and ‘postcolonial’ literature into the curriculum, while signifying institutional decentralisation of the English studies, is partly a matter of academic fashion, which may or may not have any connection with the real, political world. As Andrew Smith also notes in the same collection, in contrast with Said’s attempt to ‘make us remember how tangled together cultural representations are with material repression and violence’, some postcolonial theory that is primarily concerned with textual representations ‘has swallowed up any interest in the world that is being represented’.¹⁴ This materialist critique of postcolonial literary studies seeks to ‘take up the Marxist questions of capitalism and class domination while fighting new and old forms of colonization and imperialism’.¹⁵ In other words, in order to reconnect the discipline to the world beyond the academy, postcolonial scholars need to locate the *text* in the *context* of globalisation, which maintains and even intensifies the oppressive structure of unequal relations between the global North and global South, especially economic relations.

More recently, the Warwick Research Collective, comprising of a number of materialist critics including Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus, propose similar objectives for literary studies in the context of the ‘world literature’ revival in literary criticism. Employing the theory of uneven and combined development, they add a hyphen to ‘world literature’, in line with world-systems theory, and define the term as ‘the literature of the modern capitalist world-system’, which, they argue, is a single system governed by the logic of modernity.¹⁶ Their main concern, therefore, is the literary articulation of such a system, which would situate a text in the particular context within which it is written

¹³ Less than ten years earlier, Moore-Gilbert noted an emergence of taught Master degrees providing ‘Postcolonial studies’, particularly at the Universities of Kent, Warwick and Essex. Yet, optional modules in postcolonial literary and theory had become part of the English curriculum ‘in all but the most traditional (and these are often, not coincidentally, the most prestigious) institutions’ in Britain. See Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 5.

¹⁴ Andrew Smith, ‘Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Literary Studies’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. by Lazarus, pp. 241–61 (p. 257).

¹⁵ Shaobo Xie, ‘Is the World Decentred? A Postcolonialist Perspective on Globalization’ in *Global Fissures: Postcolonial Fusions*, Cross/Cultures 85, ed. by Clara A.B. Joseph and Janet Wilson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 53–75 (p. 72).

¹⁶ WReC (Warwick Research Collective), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 15.

while simultaneously registering its resonance with other contexts in the same world-system. Acknowledging Pascale Casanova's analysis of the 'world republic of letters' as part of their conceptual framework, WReC make clear that they do not agree with her treatment of the literary and the real world as separate entities:

But she nevertheless seems to us to abstract too strongly from the world of politics: she tends to treat the 'literature-world' and the 'everyday world' a little too much as parallel universes, with the result that questions concerning their intersection—questions as to the terms of their *relationship*—find themselves being deferred in her study. Since we are suggesting that world-literature be conceived precisely through its mediation by and registration of the modern world-system, our focus falls more directly than Casanova's on such questions.¹⁷

Their emphasis on the intersection between literature and the world is undoubtedly vital. Their analytical framework, examining literary texts as the product of modernity, a specific historical period that is also a global phenomenon, could be applied to an impressively wide range of works produced in this world-system, including those that have not been recognised by metropolitan academia.

While I also take their objective of linking the *text* to the *context* as my own, I would argue that these critics may risk propagating the aura of academic exclusivity if they fail to take into account the issue of readership of this 'world-literature' they regard as their primary object of study. While their focus on the relationship between the texts and the world in the context of global capitalism makes a crucial contribution to the field, WReC does not address the key dimension of readership as a way of locating texts in Casanova's 'international literary space', within which postcolonial literature and theory are circulated and received. This oversight makes it difficult to see how this literary insight could be transmitted to the world beyond metropolitan academia. In other words, a reading approach which connects the two 'parallel universes' needs to be developed in tandem with an understanding of the world of literary production and consumption. Moreover, the literary academic field, which forms part of the world's literary space, is also made up of networks of unequal relations not exempt from capitalist logic, and the discrepancy between the centre and the periphery is even more pronounced in the global context. The task of connecting such an intellectual activity as reading to the political 'everyday world' is thus inseparable from the enquiry into the reception site of the literary and theoretical production. Such a site is populated by those who could identify as general

¹⁷ WReC, p. 9.

readers or professional readers whose access to the 'regime of knowledge' at the centre is highly mediated.

Locating peripheral voices

This project serves as a starting point for a larger and more comprehensive study of the reception site or sites of postcolonial literature as a global product, the mixture of literary and sociological enquiry which, for its historical and geographical range, could be completed only through collaborative work of academics from both local and international settings. Drawing analytical inspiration from the materialist critics mentioned earlier, I contextualise my research within existing scholarly discussions in postcolonial and, more recently, world literature studies, which, although essentially intertwined, will be divided into two categories for the sake of clarity. The first category is the critical commentaries concerned with literary commodification ignited by Graham Huggan's hugely influential book *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001). The postcolonial exotic, Huggan argues, is 'a pathology of cultural representation under late capitalism', and even the 'strategic exoticism', the self-conscious manipulation of exoticist assumptions to undermine them, is simply 'a further symptom of it'.¹⁸ In other words, every postcolonial literary production, either unwittingly complying with the colonial discourse or consciously challenging it, is subject to the logic of the market and thus symptomatic of the 'postcolonial exotic' phenomenon. While the book itself has been pointedly criticised by Sarah Brouillette for its suggestion that the critics of the market actually exist *above*, not *within* it, the issue of literary commodification is still a major subject of academic and cultural enquiry especially when the popularity of 'world literature' as both a global product and an academic category raises questions about the impact of global capitalism on literary production and consumption.¹⁹ Noting that 'more and more European, African, Asian and South American authors see themselves as having "failed" if they do not reach an international audience,' Tim Parks expresses his concern about the disappearance of 'the kind of work that revels in the subtle nuances of its own language and literary culture' as a result of literary globalisation.²⁰ For Parks, the formula for the 'dull new global novel' is a combination of Rushdie or Pamuk's 'fantasy devices' and a liberal political stance. Remarkably, the 'international audience' in this context

¹⁸ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 33.

¹⁹ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

²⁰ Tim Parks, 'The Dull New Global Novel', *New York Review of Books*, 9 February 2010
<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/> [accessed 27 August 2017].

resides in the anglophone world, and reaching them through translations entails the loss of literary quality that a work has in its original language. A similar argument has been made in *Against World Literature* (2014), where Emily Apter critiques the institutionalisation of ‘World Literature’ as defined by David Damrosch.²¹ In the context of world literature studies, she argues, local literature is subjected to ‘pedagogical transmission by instructors with low levels of cultural literacy and nonexistent knowledge of a translated work’s original language’.²²

Evidently, world literature, not unlike its ‘postcolonial’ precursor, is skeptically viewed as a global literary product tailored to meet market demands at the expense of the text’s aesthetic and political power. Calling for the return of the ‘internationalist’ literary ‘project’, not ‘product’, the editors of the literary magazine *n+1* criticise today’s world literature for its lack of revolutionary spirit of the ‘earlier era of World Literature, when things were still “postcolonial”’.²³ Literary academics who engage with world literature, meanwhile, are seen as major beneficiaries of its marketability. In Ben Conisbee Baer’s review of Apter’s book, he offers what has arguably become a default way of criticising this latest academic sensation: ‘World Literature is good for business: good for publishers, good for college enrollments, and good for the professors who can earn a down payment or two by writing a successful textbook’.²⁴ Although this kind of criticism is certainly valid and should be born in mind, I agree with Gloria Fisk that it should not obscure the ‘much better questions like *where, how much, to whose advantage, and in what way*’.²⁵ That is, exposing postcolonial and world literature’s subjection to the market is one thing; analysing this phenomenon in a specific context or trying to disturb its momentum is another. Understandably, Apter’s criticism appears to be specifically addressed to American literary academia; yet, from the point of view of an academic from the periphery, I find that the statement advocates an elitist view towards literature. Her worry about literature being treated like an ‘artifact’ and misused by culturally illiterate teachers outside its country of origin possibly motivates her to propose an alternative

²¹ In *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), Damrosch defines world literature as a mode of circulation and reading.

²² Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, (London: Verso, 2014), p. 326.

²³ ‘World Lite: What is Global Literature?’, *n+1*, Fall 2013 <<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/>> [accessed 27 August 2017]. Note here that *n+1*’s editors associate ‘postcolonial’ with the political project, not the literary commodification.

²⁴ Ben Conisbee Baer, ‘It’s Only the End of the World’, *boundary 2*, 41.2 (2014), pp. 213-225 (pp. 213-14).

²⁵ Gloria Fisk, “‘Against World Literature’: The Debate in Retrospect”, *American Reader* <<http://theamericanreader.com/against-world-literature-the-debate-in-retrospect/>> [accessed 27 August 2017].

pedagogical model for the ‘untranslatable’. This model, however, seems to treat world literature as a cultural object preserved exclusively for those with specific language and literary expertise, who could detect and thus appreciate what could not be translated. This emphasis on linguistic and cultural barriers makes it even more unlikely for the readers, either professional or lay, at the periphery of the global literary field to be able to access ‘good’ world literature. As I have discussed, bringing into being a new reading and pedagogical approach is also part of my critical ambition, yet I see my work heading in the opposite direction from Apter. While Apter’s academic revolution is premised upon the inability of readers, except for the radically small number of experts of a particular language or culture, to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries and arrive at the ‘true’ meaning of the original texts, mine is rooted in the belief that readers, especially the peripheral ones, have potential to enhance the meaning of a literary work when it is read in their own context. The position of the readers in relation to the cultural, economic or academic centres allows them to read the same text in productively different ways, whether it is in the original language or translated version. Therefore, although global commodification of world literature is certainly an issue, I am less concerned with its promotion of, in Apter’s view, low-quality cultural transmission, than with its tendency to obscure peripheral voices. While Apter moves towards restricting the ‘authorised’ readings, which are indeed already highly restricted in the academic context, I aim to expand them by including as many perspectives as possible into literary conversations.

Having said that, my research does not take for granted the free and fair circulation of literary production that would enable readers in all over the world to have equal opportunities to access the texts, even without (or sometimes in spite of) the intervention of the academic ‘regime of value’²⁶. As Sarah Brouillette argues about the effect of economic inequality upon cultural and literary knowledge:

The requisite level of cultural literacy and access to literary works is fundamentally determined by status in hierarchies demanded by the division of labour—hierarchies that a better or more representative world literature (more complex, more sophisticated, less translatable, more committed) cannot hope to affect.²⁷

²⁶ John Frow defines the regime of value as ‘the set of institutional and semiotic conditions’ responsible for a particular value-making process within ‘a framework of shared understandings’ (John Frow, ‘The Practice of Value’, *Textual Cultures: Texts, Contexts, Interpretation*, 2.2 (2007), 61-76 (p. 71).

²⁷ Sarah Brouillette, ‘World Literature and Market Dynamics’ in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, ed. by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 93-108 (p. 102). Brouillette is responding to critiques of the market such as given in Apter’s book and *n+1*’s article, arguing that the problem is not just cultural.

For Brouillette, the attempt of literary academics to define ‘good’ world literature is only a matter of ‘aesthetic’ preference: that is, it does not take into account the material condition under which people read (or fail to read) literary texts.²⁸ I agree with her that a careful scrutiny of ‘hierarchies’ of readers in the global literary field, which in Brouillette’s opinion is determined by the logic of global capitalism, is imperative, if world literary studies is to challenge the unequal power relations within the world-system. Therefore, although it is beyond the scope of my current project to analyse in details the operation of the global literary marketplace that plays out in a particular site of reception, I feel the necessity to substantially demonstrate, through my case study, the factors that influence the ways in which a literary text is received at a peripheral location. The discrepancy between the literary centre and periphery in this context, I would argue, is subject to local socio-ideological factors as much as global economic ones.

The second set of debates, centring around the issue of reception, could be said to sit at the other end of the scholarly spectrum from the first one. Instead of focusing on the text and its subjection to the market, it attempts to gain understanding of the text’s readers. Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson’s *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception* (2012), the collection of essays from which I draw early inspiration for my work, showcases a wide range of rigorous studies on the reception of postcolonial literary production. Interestingly, it is also Huggan, criticised for his sense of academic superiority, who actively encourages empirical studies of real readers. In his preface to the book, referring to Brouillette’s ‘unfair’ criticism of his work, Huggan agrees that ‘there is an urgent need for more work on the geographical and historical *particularities* of audience and reception in postcolonial literary studies’.²⁹ Apart from the lack of models and training, he proposes, ‘snobbery about popular culture’ could explain why postcolonial academics have been overlooking reception studies.³⁰ That is to say, ‘high’ literature predominates in the postcolonial literary field, and some scholars regard popular forms of literature as ‘inauthentic’, subject to the conditions of mass production and consumption. Indeed, as the editors of *Postcolonial Audiences* demonstrate in the book’s introduction, there has been a body of work engaging with the *readers* (in a variety of definitions) of postcolonial texts both within and outside the metropolises. The studies have made visible readings as diverse as ‘localised readings,

²⁸ Brouillette, ‘World Literature and Market Dynamics’, p. 98.

²⁹ Graham Huggan, ‘A Preface: Reflections on the Postcolonial Exotic’, in *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception*, ed. by Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson (London: Routledge, 2012), p. xiv.

³⁰ Huggan, ‘A Preface’, p. xv.

aspirational readings, parallel readings, juridical readings, public and private readings, misreadings, communal readings, contrary readings, resistant readings and new technologies of reading'.³¹ These various ways of approaching literary texts could be said to confirm the death of the author (and perhaps the critic), since the readers, intentionally or not, undermine the notion that the author is the origin of what one could make of a text. They even refuse to be confined within interpretive or symptomatic readings, as critics tend to be. Since what matters is how a text is *received*, not what it is *about*, the questions of the author's authenticity or subjection to the market appear to be less important than the experiences of readings themselves.

Procter and Benwell's more recent work, *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (2015), makes an important intervention in this area of studies by providing a whole new way to frame an analysis of postcolonial reception, based on their accounts of 'non-metropolitan' readers' responses to 'metropolitan' texts that have been associated with cosmopolitanism.³² By 'non-metropolitan' they mean those outside of such a cultural and literary centre as London, which are comprised of book groups within the UK, including groups in Bristol, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and outside the UK, including groups in Ontario, Port of Spain, Kano and New Delhi. The novels provided for all book groups were Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), which are closely related in terms of their themes, settings and public profiles. Notably, this choice of texts indicates another possible way to categorise diasporic literature in Britain. Instead of relying on the author's ethnic background like I do in this thesis, Procter and Benwell use the novels' shared 'cosmopolitan' characteristics as a criterion. The fact that *Brick Lane* is chosen in both instances, in addition, underscores its 'centrality' within the studies of Black British literature that makes it an obvious challenging case for the inquiry into the issue of peripheral readership.

Arguing against privileging professional over lay readers, Procter and Benwell cogently problematize postcolonial academics' scepticism about literary commodification:

By placing a firewall around the literary text in order to protect it from easy domestication and commodification by 'western audiences', postcolonial critics

³¹ Huggan, 'A Preface', p 4.

³² James Procter and Bethan Benwell, *Reading Across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 8.

also quarantine that text from the risks of meaning making that ‘actually existing’ readerships outside the academy expose it to.³³

Despite academics’ good intentions, they argue, ‘protection’ could also mean ‘exclusion’ for readers outside academia. The implication of such a reader-oriented study is that the metropolitan readership of postcolonial literature can no longer be taken for granted. Arguably, as evidenced by the first epigraph of this introduction, there has been a general assumption among critics about the identity of readers of literature from the peripheries since the early years of postcolonial theory’s inception. In Brouillette’s remark concerning ‘literary writing that addresses the politics of specifically Third World nations’ as a niche in the Anglo-American market, she suggests that ‘readers want to be educated to a certain degree about “other” realities – so that political material becomes eminently marketable’.³⁴ Her use of ‘readers’ evidently refers to white metropolitan subjects who, with their purchasing power, might feel the need to acquire knowledge about the ‘others’. The same ‘readers’ are also tacitly referred to when Elleke Boehmer explains the popularity of migrant writings:

Migrant literatures tend to win readers because, though bearing all the attractions of the exotic, the magical, and the other, they participate reassuringly in aesthetic and ethical languages privileged within a globalized Anglo-American culture.³⁵

While this assumption is well-grounded, it could be a reason why, when it comes to the issue of reception, some critics are less concerned with existing (or potential) readers outside the metropolises than with the agendas and influence of these metropolitan readers. In world literature studies, which has its roots in a formation of Comparative Literature that used to be considered Eurocentric, Vilashini Cooppan also reveals a similar view about readership in her definition of the (preferable kind of) ‘globalized reading’: ‘If we want to globalize comparative literature and literary studies more broadly we must seek the sheer inassimilable strangeness of difference, not erase it out of the pedagogical moment’.³⁶ Again, Cooppan makes this suggestion with reference to an American academic context, namely the Yale Comparative Literature department’s decision to introduce an undergraduate course in ‘World Literatures’ in 1999-2000. Not unlike David Damrosch’s *How to Read World Literature* (2009) that is intended for Anglo-American

³³ Procter and Benwell, p. 116.

³⁴ Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, p. 60.

³⁵ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 230.

³⁶ Vilashini Cooppan, ‘World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millennium’, *symplokē*, 9.1 (2001), pp. 15-43 (p. 39).

students, her reading advice is given to those who have power to 'assimilate' and 'erase' the 'strange' from a literary work in order to make it familiar for their own convenience. This is understandable given the origins of the discipline historically confined itself to 'a selective exchange among like, predominantly European, traditions'.³⁷ As Said once pointed out:

The history of fields like comparative literature, English studies, cultural analysis, anthropology can be seen as affiliated with the empire and, in a manner of speaking, even contributing to its methods for maintaining Western ascendancy over non-Western natives'.³⁸

World literature academics today are generally careful not to reproduce the orientalist view of the 'other'. Yet, I would like to note that the categorical framework, assigning the reader/consumer role to the 'west' and the read/consumable to the 'rest', results in a limited and exclusive definition of readers, which not only no longer makes sense in the context of global capitalism, but also lets peripheral readers go unnoticed by many metropolitan academics.

As discussed above, the study of actual sites and methods of reception sheds light on academic assumptions about literary interpretation. It subverts hierarchical relations between lay and professional readers, and introduces into postcolonial studies an approach that is truly 'decentralised'. I find the analytical framework derived from empirical evidence in *Reading Across Worlds* very useful, and indeed base my pedagogical proposal partly on it; nonetheless, I take a slightly different path of critical investigation in my current context of study. I define a postcolonial reader not only as a reading subject but also as a political agent, both in her literary and political world-systems. The study of general readers' responses to validate and contest professional interpretations is laudable as a tool to undermine the academic-centric way of reading. It should also be born in mind, however, that the lay readers are also constrained by economic and socio-ideological conditions within their own context. When considering the readers at the periphery of the world literary system in particular, we should acknowledge that their agency as readers is already curtailed by several factors, such as unequal access to cultural and literary centres, either local or global, and the weak reading culture. To put their readings against the professional ones may help widening the horizon of the academics themselves, but would not improve these problematic situations. For the purpose of gaining an insight into the systemic uneven relations through reading, I

³⁷ Cooppan, p. 26.

³⁸ Said, *Culture and imperialism*, pp. 50-51.

contend that a postcolonial reader needs an approach which simultaneously invokes political engagement and challenges an institutional way of reading at the literary centre.

In this light, even though the question about the text's complicity or resistance to the market does not concern me as much as critics of literary commodification as Huggan, I do believe there are properties *within* the texts that could be apprehended by means of attention to the plots, the characters and the narration in a particular way. Yet, I would argue that this assumption does not necessarily entail the academic monopolisation of meaning-making activities. As mentioned earlier, it is not my claim that there exists only one good and uniform way to write or read a postcolonial text. What I maintain is rather that different reading approaches can either limit or enhance the way in which a reader experiences a text, which is neither a clean slate nor a rigid, unmistakable political message. Due to this reason, although I may be adding to the already overweight side of the imbalanced professional/lay reader binary, the first four chapters of this thesis offer textual analyses that prefer one kind of reading to others. They problematise the ways in which the chosen texts are read within the postcolonial literary field, and then provide alternative readings that aim at rendering the 'absent' readers recognisable, in the first instance, within the academic reading framework. Chapter 5, meanwhile, attests to the necessity of such readings through a case study of real readers at the margin of postcolonial literary academia. The classroom observations of the students of a postcolonial literature module in a university in Thailand reveal, not how peripheral readers read differently from the academics at the centre, but how a dominant way of reading affects and limits their engagement with the text. Much as I find the scholarly attention to the lay readers commendable, I experienced its limitations when applied to this site of reception. Reading practice in Thailand, which is not a country with a strong reading culture, depends heavily upon the value-making process at the centre, be it the market or the literary institutions.

In chapter 5, I will discuss in more detail why postcolonial literature is not popular in Thailand, but for now I would just like to insist that the significance of Casanova's analysis of the world literary system cannot be emphasised enough in this context. Her brief description of the power of the critic, who in this system is the equivalent of 'aristocracy', is particularly relevant:

The power of this 'aristocracy' can be measured only in literary terms. For its 'considerable authority' consists in the supreme power to decide what is literary, and lastingly to recognize, or to consecrate, all those whom it designates as great writers: those who, in a strict sense, make literature; whose work incarnates (in some cases for 'centuries after their death') literary greatness itself in the form of

universal classics, and sets the limits and standards of what is and will be considered literary—thus literally becoming the model for all future literature.³⁹

The ‘limits and standards’ of literature set by the critics at the centre, I would also like to add, implicitly prescribes what should be read in which interpretive (or value-judging) community and through which lens. As I have discussed, most postcolonial scholars’ assumptions about readership are quite limited, and this blind spot at the centre affects reception at the periphery, probably most powerfully in academia. Although reading is apparently a solitary activity that involves personal choice of texts, identifying oneself as a member of a particular interpretive community is inherently a social and at times ideological act. As long as the Thais are not recognised by the metropolitan literary ‘aristocrats’ as the readers or potential consumers of postcolonial literature, it is unlikely that they would recognise themselves as such. Consequentially, it seems almost impossible to conduct a thorough empirical research on the lay readers so as to contrast their readings with those of the professionals. That is to say, in such a peripheral country as Thailand, the limitations of a purely ‘reader-oriented’ approach is very pronounced. Not only does such a study need to be conducted at the site that already has a strong reading culture in order to collect sufficient data, it also inadequately addresses the economic and institutional conditions that might prevent a reader from accessing a particular text in the first place, whether physically or intellectually.

My case study, with its time limit and narrow focus on a university classroom, thus serves as evidence for the need to re-consider the category of postcolonial readership at the centre, especially when we regard postcolonial literature as a potent tool to bring into light the combined and unequal world of capitalism. Therefore, although my project is not ‘reader-oriented’ in a strict sense, I hope it could contribute towards discovering or realising the readers that are as yet *absent*, at least in international academic conversations. I maintain that it is necessary to develop a reading framework that incorporates different perspectives so as to render such conversations possible. The reading I propose in this thesis is the one I believe could do this job, but it is not the only way that actual readers can productively engage with texts.

Towards a ‘global’ perspective on the literary world-system

This thesis consists of two parts. The first one is composed of textual and extratextual analyses of four debut novels of contemporary British South Asian writers: Hanif

³⁹ Casanova, p. 21.

Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (2002), and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). Social and literary contexts of each novel in relation to the issue of readership are discussed in order to locate each of them within 'the world republic of letters'. This will be followed by an interrogation of each text's potential to either undermine or, conversely, confirm dominant assumptions about postcolonial readership, and thus make the peripheral reader visible or invisible. The chapters are organised chronologically but also related to one another in other aspects, so I will occasionally make cross reference. Kureishi's and Syal's semi-autobiographical novels can be seen in contrast with the realist epistolary *Brick Lane* and the experimental *The Impressionist*. Yet *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Impressionist* are evidently comparable in terms of their self-conscious presentation of colonial exoticism. All of the novels loosely fall into the *Bildungsroman* genre, and the variation among them evidently affects the way readers might approach the texts.

The major factor that binds them together in this project is the tension between international recognition of the texts, either in the academia or in the market, and the possibilities and limitations of transnational readings. I thus address the potential of the texts to allow a peripheral reader to identify with a variety of contingent positions that the characters occupy in particular situations, as well as the reading approach that might allow for these diverse identifications. It should be emphasised that I do not aim at erasing all cultural differences among the readers through universalisation of experiences. Instead, I pay attention to the readers' potential identification with inequality in the world as a result of class/race/gender division that has different forms in different contexts.

Chapter 1 introduces the readers to the main argument of the thesis. It locates Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* in its literary contexts of the early 1990s, considering the way in which Kureishi engages with the politics of representation and distinguishes himself from his literary precursors. Through the discussion of the debate between Huggan and Brouillette regarding the issue of literary commodification, it explores more fully the problematic assumption about white metropolitan readership of postcolonial literature, and demonstrates how *The Buddha of Suburbia* could be read against this assumption. The novel's self-conscious depiction of the protagonist's self-exoticisation, as seen in his theatrical performances, draws attention to the fictional 'readers', for example, Karim's English working-class mother and Jamila's newly-arrived fiancé from India, who react to the shows differently according to their different social backgrounds. Their reactions in turn reflect diverse positions of readers of a particular text which cannot be easily classified under postcolonial criticism's

consumer/consumable binary. In the final section, I discuss how the narrator invites the reader to take part in the narrative through the process of interpellation. Instead of claiming the authority as an insider, he puts himself in various positions relative to other characters, and thus allows the reader to both identify with and distance herself from him. For example, someone may share with the narrator his frustration about the uncle who tries to force his daughter to marry by starving himself. At such a moment, she and Karim are both ‘outsiders’ of the custom that might otherwise be associated with Karim’s ethnic identity. The same reader, however, may not share Karim’s feeling of disenfranchisement at school if she has always belonged to a privileged position in her own society. Reading the novel in this way, we could see not just an instance of oppression in a particular historical and geographical context, but the whole network of social injustice in which everyone may be an accomplice.

Chapter 2 considers the academic reception of Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* and discusses ways in which the novel’s class dimension is obscured under the influence of cultural studies and the postcolonial theoretical concept of hybridity. The treatment of the book as a portrayal of the ‘new’ cultural identity of the Black British in the UK removes the protagonist’s journey to maturity from its social context of the West Midlands in the 1960s, which is a telling field of class and race intersection. Regarding the issue of readership, as its status as a GCSE set text indicates, the novel is evidently considered as an ‘educational’ tool suitable for the contemporary social and political climate in the UK. Nonetheless, the narrator’s success in leaving the village of Tollington depends on her having better education and economic opportunities than her peers, despite her ethnic marginalisation. This plotline appears to encourage an identification from a middle-class perspective, and thus exclude that of the working-class, whose predicament after England’s deindustrialisation is vividly portrayed as the backdrop of the protagonist’s spiritual growth. Additionally, the depiction of the white working-class teenagers as racist may correspond to the stereotype of this demographic among middle-class liberals, and makes it even easier for some readers to ignore their plight while celebrating cultural differences. Thus, my analysis calls for attention to the perspective of the *local* peripheries, that are, the working-class in Britain, whatever their ethnic identity, whose economic condition renders impossible such empowerment of which Meena could avail herself. Shifting the focus from the middle-class’s success story to the peripheral Tollington, which everyone aspiring to become ‘better’ must leave, I argue that Anita, the white teenager, and Meena, the British Indian girl, are competing under the capitalist rules established by the centre, and the fact that Meena wins the competition simply

means that she is in an advantaged position made available by her parents' professions. In this light, *Anita*, the most 'local' book based on its moderate degree of international recognition compared to other novels examined in this thesis, has potential to yield a reading that is beyond racial politics in the UK. A reader might be able to apprehend the wider system of unequal relations that affects not only those deemed racially inferior but everyone in the peripheral positions, both economically and geographically.

In chapter 3, I investigate how Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* reveals its ideal reader through its heavy reliance on such abstract concepts as hybridity and performativity. Unlike the other three books that depict contemporary lives in Britain, it is an historical novel, set in the early 20th century and covering wide geographical areas of the formerly colonised countries. By employing a protagonist with no fixed identity, the novel ostensibly transcends identity politics and, because of that, should enable readers to identify with the story regardless of their social and cultural location. Nonetheless, responses by some 'serious' readers including amateur reviewers on *Goodreads*, Amazon's online reading community, show that they find themselves unable to establish a connection with the main character, and hence are not *impressed* by the book. Informed by the academic and the general readers' contrasting responses, I propose that the former group is *The Impressionist*'s ideal reader, and that the book's use of theoretical concepts obstructs rather than assists the transnational/transcultural reading beyond academia. This problem brings into light a discrepancy not only between professional and lay readers, but also between global elites, who might prefer intellectual exercises to textual engagement at a personal level, and the rest of the population at the cultural and literary periphery. Apparently, the world could certainly be connected through reading, but only some readers would be able to afford an access into such an interpretive community. However, I contend that, by shifting the focus from the postmodern protagonist to the omniscient narrator's voice, we could read the novel as a realistic presentation of the totality of the British Empire's world-system. Instead of identifying with the central character, a reader, who may or may not be theoretically well-equipped, could relate to the peripheral subjects of the Empire's expansion of global capitalism, imagining herself as a part of the unequal system which determines the lives of all individuals within it in a variety of ways.

The last chapter of textual analysis deals with the most widely known novel among the four. It looks into the way in which the narrative form of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* as a female *Bildungsroman* produces a reading framework that prescribes not only how the book is read, but also who is included or not as a reader. Through the female self-

liberated protagonist, the book purportedly invites the readers to identify with a peripheral character, a woman in an ethnic minority community, while at the same time aligning them with the perspective of the core, the economically and socially advanced Britain. This process of interpellation, however, does alienate readers (and in many cases, non-readers) who might be unable or not willing to identify with the book's liberal feminist point of view. I further argue that, to bring these readers into conversations instead of dismissing them on the basis of either literary or academic freedom, we need to go against the novel's reading formation, shifting the focus from the story of (female) development to the contrast between the core and the periphery, between those who can integrate into dominant British society and those who cannot. By looking at problems that the text raises but cannot resolve, such as the struggles of the male characters, which obviously relate to the now well-known controversies around the book caused by the male members of London's Bangladeshi community, we could read the book as the (possibly unintended) manifestation of the myth of development. As a global product, *Brick Lane* also reminds us how capitalist ideology could be globally circulated and endorsed through literary works. Since it is impossible to obstruct the 'flow' of the market, I contend that it is necessary to pay more attention to localised reading and pedagogical approaches at the peripheral site of reception. The final section of the thesis attempts to substantiate this claim.

In the case study chapter, after outlining the socio-ideological conditions of Thai middle-class and disciplinary limitations in Thai academia, I give an account of my classroom observations, conducted in 2015 at Thammasat University, Thailand, to exemplify my argument about peripheral readership. Led by an informative and encouraging lecturer, the senior English literature students read *The Buddha of Suburbia* and discussed such issues as politics of representation. Through the discussions, they revealed their own formation as middle-class Thais which informed the way in which they engaged with the text. As will be seen in the details on these observations, postcolonial theory—Bhabha's is especially prominent here—did not facilitate the students to identify themselves with characters who have different social and cultural backgrounds even though there are many instances in the book that could resonate with their experiences. To fill the gap between the postcolonial texts from the centre and the students at the periphery, I propose a localised and contextualised pedagogical approach, using the four novels as sample study materials. The readings given in chapter 1-4 are applied here, certainly with consideration of conditions specific to the Thai students. My contention is that the awareness of each text's intended readers, as well as its 'absent'

ones, could enable the students to reflect on their own positions in relations to different characters whose perspectives and social statuses may be different from the protagonist's. These possible intersectional points of identification make available the connection between the readers and the texts beyond the postcolonial theoretical reading framework. Even though the case of Thai readers is context-specific, I hope it will have wider implications for the studies of World Literature and 'postcolonial' readers in the context of global capitalism. While global literary circulation is unavoidably subjected to market constraints and as a result might accentuate the gap between the economically privileged and underprivileged, it at the same time increases the possibility for the readers in different locations at the margin of the world-system to 'see' each other through texts. Certainly, as I have argued, this possibility cannot be automatically realised without interventions by local and international academic communities. The locals could draw from the international scholarship the wide-ranging perspectives of readers in different geographical and social locations, and apply them to their own context; in turn, localised reading practices could add to the ever-increasing body of knowledge about global readership in this literary world-system, and, hopefully, make it less unequal.

Chapter One

Karim on Stage: Multiplicity of readers in *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Works of imagination are amazingly antinational even where the author may think she or he is espousing national themes. People identify with a good tale and the characters irrespective of the tale's region of origins. Like a mirror or a camera, a work of art may reveal more than consciously intended. Works of imagination refuse to be bound within national geographies; they leap out of nationalist prisons and find welcoming fans outside the geographic walls.⁴⁰

A world literature does indeed exist today, new in its form and its effects, that circulates easily and rapidly through virtually simultaneous translations and whose extraordinary success is due to the fact that its denationalized content can be absorbed without any risk of misunderstanding.⁴¹

In the context of global capitalism, literature as a cultural product has ambivalent features that are demonstrated in the two epigraphs above. Transnational literature can encourage diversity by opening possibility of readings from different national and historical backgrounds. At the same time, it can eradicate differences through its generalisable content and its promotion of an institutionalised way of reading. As a result, although the ability of international publishers to circulate books globally enables consumption beyond national geographies, it could be seen as engendering cultural uniformity. In this context, postcolonial texts are confronted with a new challenge. It is not whether the voices of the peripheries can be heard or not, but how such voices, reproduced as global products, are incorporated in the network of global relations centred in the west. This new face of colonialism that maintains the binary centre/peripheries through economic power cannot be undermined only by the Empire's 'writing back'.⁴² Reconsidering the status of postcolonial literature within this global capitalist system is thus a necessary step towards resistance to the cultural hegemonic power sustained through literary products, not by totally dismissing it but by promoting diversified, decentralised ways of consumption.

As I discussed in the introduction, a possible way to such a goal is to shift attention from the 'writers' and the politics of representation around them to the 'readers', from the meaning created within a particular context for a particular purpose to the reception given by diverse readers in the global literary field. This would seem to be an easy task if postcolonial studies were not notorious for its failure to recognise the importance of the

⁴⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 58.

⁴¹ Casanova, p. 172.

⁴² With reference to *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (1989), regarded as one of the founding texts of postcolonial literary studies.

reader.⁴³ The postcolonial reading framework, itself also a product of western academia, further risks monopolising the way postcolonial texts are categorised and read. As Neil Lazarus discusses in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, postcolonial literary studies tend to be selective when choosing and categorising the texts due to the ‘theory-based’, not ‘text-based’ practices of the scholars in the discipline: ‘all that is required of the texts evoked is that they permit—which is to say, not actively disallow—a certain, very specific and very restricted kind of reading to be staged through reference to them’.⁴⁴ In this light, postcolonial texts are hand-picked to demonstrate postcolonial theories, even though it is supposed to be the other way round. In other words, theories precede texts and their readers as meaning-makers. Therefore, despite its premise of challenging and undermining the colonial centre, the postcolonial framework, globally circulated from the metropolitan academia through cultural and academic institutions, can be seen as intrinsically centralised.

Informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of ‘field’, Pascale Casanova contends that a world of letters has ‘its own capital, its own provinces and borders, in which languages become instruments of power’.⁴⁵ Although the two worlds, political and literary, are interconnected and their territories often overlap, the forms of struggle and competition and the relations between members of each world do not necessarily coincide. In this ‘literature-world’, Casanova identifies the peripheral writers who would become the revolutionary forces that alter the world’s literary order as the ‘eccentric’.⁴⁶ Many of them in the past, most prominently James Joyce and William Faulkner, redefined the criteria and practices of world literature and to some extent became part of the centre. Borrowing this concept of literary centre-periphery locations from Casanova, I call the authors in this thesis the ‘centric-eccentric’ whose works nominally originates from the centre, that is Britain, but occupy a relatively peripheral position within such a centre. They are certainly not as revolutionary as Casanova’s ‘eccentric’, and more likely to depend on rather than to work against the centre. Yet, I would argue that their novels reflect uneven global relations in ways that could engage readers with diverse backgrounds and subject positions. In other words, while the ‘eccentric’ are the spearheads of the global peripheral writers, the ‘centric-eccentric’, who are culturally and geographically parts of the centre, have potential to render visible the peripheral readers who may not yet be recognised within postcolonial metropolitan academia. This chapter reads Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*

⁴³ Graham Huggan, ‘A Preface: Reflections on the Postcolonial Exotic’, p. xiii-xvi.

⁴⁴ Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 22.

⁴⁵ Casanova, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Casanova, p. 355.

(1990) to illustrate such a potential. It also introduces the readers to my analytical method in the forthcoming chapters, problematising the postcolonial theoretical framework when applied to each text and proposing an alternative, intersectional reading of the text. In the next section, I locate the novel in the world's literary geography to demonstrate its characteristic features that both explain the limited reading framework of existing scholarly reception and suggest the possibility of going beyond such limitations.

The 'centric-eccentric' work

Karim Amir, the protagonist and narrator of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, is a teenager growing up in Bromley in the 1970s, whose ethnic identity, imposed on him by his Indian father, lands him in show business in metropolitan London. 'An Englishman born and bred, almost', he has neither specific goals in life nor political commitments, and simply performs his newly-invented Indianness in order to get by in the industry, just like his father who performs as an exotic guru for the spiritually lost Britons.⁴⁷ His unfinished journey towards maturity is set against the backdrop of his family crisis, the rise of the National Front, the proliferation of the punk subculture and the ascendancy of Margaret Thatcher. Drawing extensive critical attention in almost thirty years since it was published, *The Buddha of Suburbia* has given Kureishi a secure status as one of the most prominent contemporary British writers. The novel's success can be attributed to its fresh perspective on the so-called 'Black' communities at the time. Being emblematic of the postcolonial hybrid culture, it is not only considered demonstrative of the 'second moment of black cultural politics',⁴⁸ but is also by now generally accepted as 'the first novel to supposedly herald diversity and create the possibility of imagining a different kind of mixed-race Englishman'.⁴⁹ By displaying cultural differences and social conflicts among minorities in Britain, Kureishi distinguishes his first novel, also regarded as his semi-autobiography, from earlier works written by members of the first-generation diasporas that focus on the conflicts between the 'home' and the 'host' cultures.⁵⁰ His physical distance from the home country of his father as a second-generation immigrant born and raised in Britain, furthermore, allows him to see himself as a member of the host country. As a result, his

⁴⁷ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 3. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁴⁸ James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 156.

⁴⁹ Susheila Nasta, 'Introduction' in *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

⁵⁰ Ranasingha, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain*, pp. 224-25. See also an extensive review of the biographical interpretations of the book in Bradley Buchanan, *Hanif Kureishi* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

novel leans towards expanding the definition of Britishness rather than maintaining the boundary between insider and outsider of the British culture.

Of particular interest is the novel's ambiguous location in the global literary geography. Just like Karim the narrator, who lives in 'a cosmopolitan space not fully attached to or detached from either British nation-space or some nationless world-space', *The Buddha of Suburbia* possesses a hybrid characteristic of being both local and international.⁵¹ It is considered international in terms of the global issues that provide the backdrop to the novel, and local for its emphasis on the lived experiences of the protagonist. According to Bart Moore-Gilbert, even though the subject matter of Kureishi's work is confined within the national territory of the United Kingdom, he deserves to be regarded as a contemporary world writer because of his engagement with such 'world historical events' as the decline of the British empire and global capitalism.⁵² Also, Kureishi generalises 'his own experience of the cultural "in-betweenness" faced by millions of migrants and their descendants the world over - and, more specifically, by those who have gravitated from the non-western world to the great cities of the West'.⁵³ In this respect, his work can be seen as international since its local subjects generate identifications from immigrant readers throughout the globe. The success of *The Buddha*, which has sold more than half a million copies and been translated into more than twenty languages, seems to support this assumption.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, as James Procter convincingly argues, the primary 'in-between' or liminal cultural location of Kureishi's work is not actually transnational.⁵⁵ Karim's liminal space is suburban London, not the margin where Indian and English cultures meet. Unlike Rushdie's protagonists who journey from east to west, Karim 'commutes' from the suburb, the provincial London, to the city, metropolitan London, so Kureishi's novel should be seen as an expression of the poetics of the local 'commuter' rather than transnational immigrants.⁵⁶ Procter diagnoses Karim's 'nomadism' as 'symptomatic of his desire to uproot himself, to escape from the parochialism of the suburbs and to embrace a cosmopolitan position within his narrative, a position which he explicitly attributes to the

⁵¹ John Clement Ball, 'The Semi-Detached Metropolis: Hanif Kureishi's London', *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 27.4 (1996), 21-3. Cited in Susheila Nasta, *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 197.

⁵² Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 2-5.

⁵³ Moore-Gilbert, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Moore-Gilbert, p. 189.

⁵⁵ In 'Suburbia', chapter 4 of his book, Procter discusses Kureishi in conjunction with Meera Syal, whose work I examine in chapter 2.

⁵⁶ Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 154.

metropolitan centre of London'.⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that Procter assigns Karim's 'roots' to the localism of the English suburbs, where people confine themselves within the domestic sphere and fetishise household objects, not his racial background. Hence, Karim's identity crisis seems to be local, bound tightly to English society.

However, Procter's association of cosmopolitanism with central London renders the racial implication of Karim's desire to 'uproot' himself even more visible. The city is significant to Karim not for its social or economic advancement, but for the multicultural mentality that allows him to gain 'a cosmopolitan position'. In narrow-minded suburbia, Karim as a member of an ethnic minority is alienated from his childhood surroundings, and yearns for the metropolitan city where he believes opportunities can be offered to people like him. To leave the place of his roots is not to change his social position as an Englishman, but to locate himself in the new surroundings where his racial identity is not an obstacle. Therefore, Karim's journey within England may also be considered as a migration, though in a different way from his ancestors, or, as Nasta puts it, 'a local version of the international migrations of a whole number of earlier fictions'.⁵⁸

Undeniably, the defining line between local and international positions of *The Buddha of Suburbia* is very difficult, if not impossible, to draw. Nonetheless, all the discussions above focus on the book's thematic reflection on the real, political world, be it local Britain or global society. Thus, the terms 'international' and 'transnational' that I have used alternately in opposition to the 'local' have nothing to do with Pascale Casanova's description of 'literary internationalism' as the idealistic cosmopolitan society that promotes the 'free circulation' of great literary works without 'national prejudices'.⁵⁹ To see the possibility of this book, whose subjects are arguably both local and global, to reach the audience beyond the national boundary and enquire into its potential obstacles, I shift attention from *The Buddha's* relationship to the political world to its location within the literary world. This is brought to light by an examination of the context in which the book is written together with its scholarly reception. Kureishi is certainly not the first famous South Asian British author, but the fact that he wrote against the expectations of audiences that engaged in the politics of representation during the late 1980s earned him a significant spot in the postcolonial literary field. This institutionalisation of *The Buddha of Suburbia* at a literary centre, on one hand, could promote international consumption; on the other, it places the book in an interpretive community of postcolonial scholars that could limit the way in which it is read. After discussing this contradictory situation, I examine the fictional

⁵⁷ Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 150 (my emphasis).

⁵⁸ Nasta, *Home Truths*, p. 197.

⁵⁹ Casanova, p. 172.

readers, which refer to the audience of Karim's theatrical performances. Their diverse responses to these performances, I would argue, anticipate the various ways of approaching a text from different perspectives, and undermine the distinction between 'the activities of "post-colonial writers/thinkers"' and 'those of the market reader' as assumed by some critics.⁶⁰ Finally, I will investigate how, through the process of interpellation, in which the readers are invited to identify with Karim's contingent social positions, the novel could yield readings beyond the tourist/anti-tourist dichotomy.

Hanif Kureishi, just as other writers whose works are examined in this thesis, can be considered as a 'centric-eccentric' writer. As a member of an ethnic minority group, he writes about those in the peripheries, of the white British society in general and of metropolitan London in particular, but from a centre of the Anglophone literary world via Faber and Faber, a well-known publisher based in London. Apparently, his work can be classified as 'minor' literature according to David Lloyd's definition, that is, literature which is 'written by minorities but in the major language of a dominant culture' and is 'oppositional to its "major" counterpart'.⁶¹ However, *The Buddha of Suburbia*'s location within the English literary world complicates this generalisation which is based on a binary opposition between the minority and the dominant culture. When *The Buddha of Suburbia* was published in 1990, Kureishi was already famous as a playwright and screenwriter; his first screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) had been nominated for an Oscar. Thus, to some extent he was already part of the establishment in the Anglophone cultural scene.

Meanwhile, his ethnic identity, which admittedly contributes to his unique perspective towards to British society, put him in the politics of representation in the late 1980s.⁶² Around this time, there were enthusiastic movements among scholars specialising in Asian literature to make this heterogeneous body of peripheral works more internationally recognised. In the Symposium 'Asian Voices in English', a joint project between The British Council and the English Department at the University of Hong Kong held in April 1990, Leon Comber noted that Asian writers whose voices had been heard internationally published their works from outside Asia, citing Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie as examples. He speculated that:

⁶⁰ Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, p. 18.

⁶¹ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 84.

⁶² It should be noted that the category 'British Asian', as distinct from other 'Black' diasporas had just been acknowledged by the Commission for Racial Equality's general recommendation in 1988 (Nasta, *Home Truths*, p. 182).

This may well be because all of them have lived in the West at some time and have had access either directly or through literary agents to Western publishers, and they did not have to try to gain a foothold, as it were, from the 'outside'.⁶³

Having opportunities to write from the centre, these writers seem to be in a more fortunate position than those publishing from the peripheral countries. Yet, as Aamer Hussein, a Pakistani writer living in London, stated in the same conference, those who write in English have a weightier burden as representative members of ethnic communities. Unlike the writers who use their 'native' languages to communicate with their audience at home, the migrant writers 'are expected to speak for [their] people while [they] really speak *to* and *of* them'. Counting himself as one, Hussein further explains the ambiguous position of this group of writers:

the use of our adapted language is fraught with ambiguity, with the notion of otherness, the sense of having continually to explain ourselves to alien audiences. And yet a curious snobbery prevails among those in our own countries who feel that we have discarded their values and given in to the pressure of alienation by choosing to write in English.⁶⁴

While the language with which these writers choose to write enables them to speak *to* the 'alien audiences' *for* their ethnic community, it subjects them to the criticism of people in their home countries for their lack of loyalty to their cultural values. According to Nahem Yousaf, Kureishi was also faced with a similar demand for moral and political responsibilities to the Asian community in Britain to which he belongs. Emphasising that such a community is the 'imagined construction', Yousaf argues how Kureishi was assessed from *within* it by referring to Gurinder Chadha's criticism of him for being 'isolated from the Asian side of himself' and lacking 'real cultural integrity'.⁶⁵ The pressure on migrant writers from their ethnic communities both in the home and the host countries indicates the assumption that all Asian writers should have a unified voice, with the same aspiration to portray 'accurate' pictures of their people to the *outside* world.

On the other side of the coin, works of the second-generation immigrants in Britain in the late 1980s were still 'relegated to Third World peripheries' by the publishing establishment. Within this context, Hussein expresses hope that *The Buddha of Suburbia*, having just been published, would 'remedy the situation'.⁶⁶ Kureishi's profile as a 'well-known screenwriter' is considered here as a great advantage that would not only ease him

⁶³ Leon Comber, 'Publishing Asian Writers in English', *Asian Voices in English*, ed. by Mimi Chan and Roy Harris (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1991), pp. 79-86 (p. 85).

⁶⁴ Aamer Hussein, 'The Echoing of Quiet Voices', *Asian Voices in English*, pp. 101-108 (p. 102).

⁶⁵ Nahem Yousaf, 'Hanif Kureishi and "the Brown Man's Burden"', *Critical Survey*, 8.1 (1996), 14-25 (pp. 16-17).

⁶⁶ Hussein, p. 106.

into the mainstream book industry, but also benefit other British Asian writers who, as Hussein claims, were very enthusiastic about creating their own space within the British literary culture beyond the existing categories:

Let us, they say, speak out loud and let eavesdroppers listen. Let us discard notions of the literary metropolis as a European centre; let us claim decentralisation and autonomy. Let us recognise and define our own spaces: and if our writings are categorised as Third World, Black, Feminist, Nationalist, let us widen and affirm our own identities.⁶⁷

Notably, the tension between these writers' responsibility for their ethnic communities and their ambition to redefine the literary map of the dominant culture has the white middle-class metropolitan readership at the centre. It is *to* this particular group of readers that the migrant writers are expected to speak *for* their people. It is also *within* their field of cultural consumption that these writers try to locate themselves. Finally, it is *against* their tendency to stereotype and categorise that the British Asian writers construct their identities.

As I mentioned earlier, Kureishi seems to work against the expectation from the ethnic community to which he belongs rather than trying to fulfil it, and, as a result, gains considerable importance within an emerging intellectual movement led by postcolonial academics working in metropolitan universities. Stuart Hall stated that *My Beautiful Laundrette* is 'the most transgressive text there is'. The complete absence of 'positive images' of ethnic minorities marks its departure from 'the politics which invites easy identification'.⁶⁸ Hall's response epitomises the conflicting demands to which Kureishi was subjected during his early career, as Yousaf perceptively summarises in an essay written in 1996:

Kureishi has, it seems to me, been judged according to a cultural studies agenda of the 1970s that expressed the need to formulate 'positive images' that would perform a public relations exercise for the community to which the artist belonged. But he has simultaneously found himself judged according to the tenets of a typically 1980s political agenda that has sought to articulate raced subject positions in ways that prove them to be both heterogeneous and sophisticated.⁶⁹

Evidently, Kureishi's work is evaluated by ways in which he represents his community and the minority groups in Britain as a whole. On one hand, he has the moral responsibility to do the public relations for his underrepresented group; on the other hand, he needs to make

⁶⁷ Hussein, p. 106.

⁶⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities', in *Culture, Globalization and the World-system: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. by Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 41-68 (p. 60).

⁶⁹ Yousaf, p. 20.

sure that ethnic minorities in the UK are faithfully portrayed as diverse and complicated as they are. These standards of judgement might be seen as an expression of the dissonance in the politics of representation around the time of the book's publication, which resulted in different expectations of literary as well as other kinds of artistic works. As the concepts of multiculturalism and hybridity were gaining ground due to the works of such postcolonial theorists as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Homi Bhabha, the writers' moral obligation to their communities declined in importance, and *The Buddha of Suburbia* gradually acquired a firm position as a postcolonial novel. In 1997, it was included in France's agrégation syllabus, and Oubechou, the editor of the special issue of the French English-language journal *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* dedicated to this novel, considers the case as an indicator of 'how far "peripheral literatures" and "minority novels" have written their way into the centre of Academia'.⁷⁰ In an essay in the same volume the book is even praised as 'a powerful and explosive form of resistance literature'.⁷¹ Remarkably, while Kureishi might be seen by literary communities at the peripheries as having an advantage over writers in the subcontinent or even abandoning the burden of speaking for his people, his novel earns the title of 'resistance literature' along its journey from the UK to the international (European) academia. This tension between the politics of representation and the institutionalisation of postcolonial texts in metropolitan academia reflects complicated ways in which different receptions and expectations from the centres and peripheries of the literary world contribute to the ambiguous status of Kureishi as a minority writer.

The Buddha of Suburbia also enjoys notable success in the local market. Kureishi already had an international fan base from his earlier works, especially *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and so the book was 'eagerly awaited'.⁷² On its first edition's back cover, Angela Carter writes on behalf of the *Guardian* that 'I doubt I will read a funnier one, or one with more heart, this year, possibly this decade,' while Salman Rushdie says that it is 'utterly irreverent and wildly improper, but also genuinely touching and truthful'. Moreover, even though it gained less critical acclaim than the Oscar-nominated screenplay, it won the Whitbread prize for the Best First Novel, and was made into a TV series by the BBC in 1993. A cause of this enthusiastic reception can be traced back to the 'politically conscious seventies, [when] there was, in TV and theatre, a liberal desire to encourage work

⁷⁰ Jamel Oubechou, 'Introduction', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, SP.4 (1997), p. 87.

⁷¹ Cynthia Carey, 'Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a Post-Colonial Novel', *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, SP.4 (1997), 119-25 (p. 119).

⁷² Clark Blaise, 'A Guru by Night', *New York Times*, 6 May 1990

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/06/books/a-guru-by-night.html?mcubz=1>> [accessed 30 Aug 2017].

from unmapped and emergent areas'.⁷³ This is notably the period in which the story in *The Buddha of Suburbia* takes place. From the way Kureishi satirises the characters in the theatre industry, it could be deduced that he sees this encouraging artistic atmosphere as inseparable from commercial prospect for the people in the industry. Nonetheless, out of that gray area, many minority writers emerged and created impact upon the literary circle and British culture. By the first half of the nineties, creative writing about the marginalised seemed to have become mainstream among 'serious' readers. As Bill Buford, the editor of *Granta 43: Best of Young British Novelists* (1993), observes: 'the Empire has now fully and properly struck back'.⁷⁴ Included in the list that its editor claims to be 'a serious statement about British literary culture', Kureishi has gained a secure seat at the centre of the English literary world, although he talks mostly about the margins of British culture both in terms of ethnicity and class.⁷⁵ The factors that contribute to this success, as discussed above, are both intellectual and political movements in Britain and the burgeoning multiculturalist outlook in its field of cultural production.

The content of *The Buddha of Suburbia* coincides with its extratextual situations in terms of its ambiguous self-positioning within the Anglophone literary world. The novel depends heavily on literature and culture of the centre, and, at the same time, gives hints of transgressive possibility from the point of view of the periphery. Western classical and popular allusions are employed for humorous effect and, with an ideological implication, for characterisation. Such references simultaneously reveal the social and cultural background of Karim, the narrator, and imply a readership that is familiar with them. When contemplating about whether he prefers to have sex with men or women, Karim confesses that 'it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one or the other, like having to decide between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones' (p. 55). On another occasion, he refers to Henrik Ibsen when talking about problems in his family: 'I'd had enough of family dramas. If I wanted all the Ibsen stuff I could have stayed indoors' (p. 58). The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, the icons of British and American popular culture, and Henrik Ibsen, highly regarded in the western world as the father of modern drama, are used as inside jokes for those who are knowledgeable about them.

In addition, the allusions help Karim describe other characters vividly, such as when he first meets Changez, Jamila's future husband:

⁷³ Ranasinha, p. 221.

⁷⁴ Bill Buford, *Granta 43: The Best of Young British Novelists 2* (London: Granta, 1993), p. 15.

⁷⁵ Buford, p. 11.

The man walking towards England, towards our curious eyes, and towards the warm winter overcoat that I held in my hand, was not Flaubert the writer, though he had a similar grey moustache, two double chins, and not much hair. (p. 78)

Here Changez is perceived through the comparison with Gustave Flaubert. His existence, both in Karim's eyes and the reader's imagination, is constructed through a canonical European figure whose 'universal' reputation is mutually understood. An even more remarkable incident is when Karim describes his father's literary tastes. Recounting that 'Chekhov was Dad's favourite all-time writer, and he always said Chekhov's plays and stories reminded him of India', he adds that his father was referring to the 'uselessness, indolence and longing' of Chekhov's characters (p. 114). Notably, it is through the western masterpieces that Karim's father connect himself to his home country and Karim, who has never been there, imagines it. In other words, they relate themselves to the periphery from and through the centre, just as the novel itself does. Regarding the implied readers of the book, these references signify the attempt of the narrator to communicate with those who have a similar cultural background. Such readers could thus be identified as the native citizens of the European world who enter into the world of the novel and its characters through the mediation of the narrator who speaks the same 'language' as them. It may also be the case for readers who are not Europeans but have the opportunity, by force or by consent, to gain western cultural knowledge through western education.

Nonetheless, this book not only grounds itself in English language and culture, but also suggests the possibility for resistance from within. As avid readers of western literature might almost immediately recognise, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is in some respects an example of a *Bildungsroman*, a popular western genre focusing on the self-development of the protagonist. Yet, the novel does not submissively comply with the conventions of its narrative structure, but manipulates it to challenge the principle of the genre itself. According to Moore-Gilbert, the *Bildungsroman* suits Kureishi's project since it 'insistently presents identity as a developmental, unstable and shifting process, rather than a given and stable product'.⁷⁶ However, the inconclusive ending and Karim's failure to become a respectable member of society highlight the book's departure from the genre's ideological conventions rather than its reliance on them. As Moore-Gilbert also points out, in contrast with the typical protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* who eventually gain a stable self after the 'process' ends, maturity for Kureishi's characters 'consists in accepting as an ethical principle the terminally polymorphous and unstable nature of selfhood'.⁷⁷ In other

⁷⁶ Moore-Gilbert, *Hanif Kureishi*, p. 117.

⁷⁷ Moore-Gilbert, p. 130.

words, the novel's alternative denouement, which resolves not to come up with the 'product' but to continue the 'process', not only diverts from that of more conventional examples of the genre, but also undermines the ideology of the stable, complete self, revealing it to be the aspiration of the immature. This version of the *Bildungsroman* story could thus be dissatisfying for the readers who expect the complete transformation of the protagonist or are familiar with the ideal selfhood as portrayed in traditional *Bildungsromane*. At the same time, it invites readers, such as black British teenagers, who may feel alienated from the mainstream narratives due to their different experiences of self-formation, to identify with Karim's unfinished growth and comprehend themselves as normal members of their society.⁷⁸

English literary icons are also attacked to expose the ideological fabrication of English literature. Recalling his painful memories at school in which he was repeatedly abused for his ethnicity, Karim directly addresses the Victorian author of *Bildungsromane*, 'Fuck you, Charles Dickens, nothing changed' (p. 63). The fiction about a child gaining self-actualisation despite all obstructions is rejected as a lie. Social inequality like that of Dickens' 19th century England still remains. It is noteworthy that here the narrator relates class struggle to racial oppression. The social mobility Dickens imagined might have become possible for a particular group of people but is certainly not applicable for everyone, especially those deemed racially inferior by the white majority. This direct attack on Dickens is also disturbing for the readers who believe in the illusion of human equal rights and opportunities.

Similarly, when Haroon is asked by his proud son what he thinks of his performance as Mowgli, he gives a blunt statement regarding the ignorance of Rudyard Kipling, the author of *The Jungle Book*:

'Bloody half-cocked business,' he said. 'That bloody fucker Mr Kipling pretending to whity he knew something about India! And an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel!'. (p. 157)

The prominent advocate of 'the white man's burden' is vilified as a pretentious man who can fool only the whites. Haroon's reaction not only signifies his refusal to see India through western eyes but also undermines 'whity's' assumption about his superiority and intelligence. More importantly, by comparing his son to a minstrel, Haroon exposes the cruelty of white racism, which sharply contrasts with the benevolent image presented by Kipling.

⁷⁸ This idea of incomplete selfhood is discussed in comparison with *The Impressionist's* characterisation of its protagonist in Chapter 3.

Evidently, *The Buddha of Suburbia* subjects Western literary genres, as well as canonical literary figures, to criticism made by 'the other' who lives in English society. Karim and Haroon are obviously knowledgeable about English literature, and they use such knowledge as a potent weapon to strike back. By using the narrative conventions and references that the implied readers are acquainted with, Kureishi manages to resist total cultural domination, and criticises Englishness from the inside. The readers implied by this address can be identified as local Britons, whose taken-for-granted pride in their English cultural heritage is threatened by the point of view of the marginalised that has been gaining space in the media. It is also possible that the implicit readers are someone like the protagonist himself—a British Asian who is 'born and bred' in Britain, nurtured by the same culture as the white Britons, but finding himself alienated by it. This textual property reaffirms the book's 'centric-eccentric' position within the world literary system. According to Casanova, 'to characterize a writer's work, one must situate it with respect to two things: the place occupied by his native literary space within world literature and his own position within this space'.⁷⁹ Kureishi is born as a writer within English literary space, a centre of the English-speaking literary world, but he takes a position against it, pushing its boundary from the inside in order to incorporate the 'eccentric' position of the ethnic minority groups in Britain. More importantly, as a so-called second-generation immigrant, he distinguishes himself from older British writers from a South Asian background, moving from the identity politics of the centre-periphery dichotomy of the 1960s to the 'post-migrant' multiculturalism of the 1980s.⁸⁰ Through this process, ironically, his novel in turn gains central status within western academia as part of an emerging postcolonial literary canon.

In a recent account of his early artistic motivation, Kureishi retrospectively explains how he managed to depart from his literary forerunners:

'I was born in Bromley and grew up in the suburbs', he says. 'VS Naipaul and Salman Rushdie were born elsewhere. By the age of 14, I'm a Pakistani kid who likes Jimi Hendrix, takes drugs and wants sex. How do you make a book out of this? [...] You have to invent a style and a world. It was a new kind of English realism'.⁸¹

Kureishi regards his birthplace and lifestyle, clearly associated with British culture, as a defining line separating himself from such older renowned South Asian writers 'born

⁷⁹ Casanova, p. 41.

⁸⁰ Ranasinha, p. 5.

⁸¹ Robert McCrum, 'Hanif Kureishi Interview: "Every 10 Years You Become Someone Else"', *Guardian*, 19 January 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/19/hanif-kureishi-interview-last-word>> [accessed 30 Aug 2017].

elsewhere' as Naipaul and Rushdie. Additionally, his literary invention attempts to offer a new kind of aesthetics to the English realist tradition, expanding the definition of the genre to suit the new post-imperial reality of Britain. Therefore, written within this literary context, *The Buddha of Suburbia* appears to grab the limelight due to its departure from both the English and nascent postcolonial literary fields which exist in the capital of the world republic of letters. Nonetheless, Kureishi is not a contemporary model of what Casanova calls 'the revolutionaries' who 'fight to change the established literary order'.⁸² The recognition is not a proof for the ideal aesthetic freedom of a work that cannot be bound to national identities, both of the 'home' and the 'host' countries. On the contrary, it emphasises the locality of the novel, whose symbolic value as a transgressive work is created in the network of literary relations with the English literature at the centre. The engagement with English realism and postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, as well as former immigrant writings in the UK, marks Kureishi's disposition in British society and history. Thus, locating his novel within the world's literary geography is easier than describing its political or cultural location. It is a local product of Britain, exported internationally, and whose theoretical connection with postcolonial literary studies, also manufactured in the West, contributes to its celebratory status in the global stage.

Since the label as a postcolonial work enables *The Buddha of Suburbia* to gain a position within western academia, such postcolonial concepts as cultural difference and hybridity become part of the meaning of the text, framing the way the book is to be received by different readers around the world. In Claire Chambers' account of the novel's impact, the assumptions behind the postcolonial reading framework are clearly visible:

The Buddha of Suburbia has been described as 'the first novel to supposedly herald diversity and create the possibility of imagining a different kind of mixed-race Englishman', while Zadie Smith describes the excitement of passing around a 'contraband' copy of the novel at her West London school and seeing for the first time people 'like me' reflected in fiction's mirror.⁸³

Both quoted statements assume the realist effect of the novel. The ethnic minorities in the UK are those reflected and represented in the book. The metropolitan readers are expected to imagine and understand the up-to-date 'reality' of the racial 'other' in their society. The writer is a representative of the marginalised communities, making their presence known to the public through his writing. Kureishi's refusal to portray 'positive' images of immigrants and ethnic minority figures succeeds in challenging the burden of

⁸² Casanova, p. 326.

⁸³ Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 228.

representation imposed upon the older minority writers; nonetheless, he is seen as drawing a more realistic picture and thus is equally situated in the representational politics. This position within western academia and the international market is subjected to criticism by postcolonial scholars who are sceptical of the commodification of the marginalised as exotic, which I will discuss further in the next section. However, it should be emphasised at this stage that although *The Buddha of Suburbia* is said to speak to the white majority who supposedly have more purchasing power in the market, its impact upon the minority readers in the UK cannot be overlooked. The fact that Zadie Smith could see people like herself in this ‘fiction’s mirror’ renders imaginable the connection between different minority groups who, due to underrepresentation in the media, might find it hard to create their own self-images.⁸⁴

What I see as problematic in such representational politics, nonetheless, is the way the identity of the writer is regarded as central to his fictional work. He is assumed to be a spokesperson of the minorities in the UK, talking to his audience among the majority. This line of thought corresponds to the postcolonial theoretical framework that eases the book into the literary establishment. Its label as a postcolonial text, however, could limit the way in which the readers in the wider global context, socially and culturally diversified, approach it. In chapter 5, I illustrate this problematic situation through my account of the Thai students’ reading of *The Buddha of Suburbia*. At this point, I would like to argue why this issue of peripheral reception does not receive adequate attention from postcolonial critics by discussing the scholarly concerns about the literary commodification of the marginalised. Then I will show how, despite its institutionalised status at the literary metropole, Kureishi’s novel can be used as an example of the postcolonial texts that go beyond their historical specificity and racialised readings. This will be done by the examination of its fictional readers, that is, the ‘consumers’ of the ‘texts’ within the novel itself.

On the postcolonial ‘dilemma’

On his way towards self-realisation and maturity, Karim enters the theatrical world, in which he has to stage his marginalities in order to be accepted. His performances can be read as a self-reflection on the author’s dilemma in the face of the contesting politics of representation in the late 1980s. According to Yousaf, Karim’s ‘dramatic presentations of

⁸⁴ See another, more recent example of the novel’s positive impact upon the minority readers at Nikesh Shukla, ‘How *The Buddha of Suburbia* let me in to a much wider world’, 17 February 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/17/how-the-buddha-of-suburbia-wider-world-hanif-kureishi-nikesh-shukla>> [accessed 30 August 2017].

Changez and Anwar and his rendition of Mowgli' are Kureishi's reflection upon his awkward position between 'a rock and a hard place', between portraying positive or 'realistic', heterogeneous images of the minorities to the majority readers.⁸⁵ Alternatively, the performances can be said to reflect the author's dilemma in the face of the market's demand, whether to commodify the minorities in order to succeed in his career or not. These two interpretations, however, focus on the conditions surrounding the writer, taking for granted the white metropolitan reader as consumer. This mode of reading is closely related to postcolonial scholars' concerns about postcolonial self-exoticisation. It is illustrative of the problematic assumption in the field of postcolonial criticism that I contend forestalls transnational readings.

According to Graham Huggan, 'exoticism' refers to a mode of 'aesthetic perception' that domesticates and estranges particular people or things at the same time. The logic of exoticism works as long as the objects of perception are made familiar but not to the extent that they lose their strangeness. Therefore, while on one hand, the word implies 'the systematic assimilation of cultural difference', on the other hand, it indicates 'an expanded [...] comprehension of diversity'.⁸⁶ An exoticised object demands that the perceivers enlarge or even distort their sense of perception in order to domesticate it while maintaining a certain distance from it. This tension between assimilation and resistance instantiates a major problem inherent in postcolonialism as a field. In order to destabilise the racial hierarchical structure through the field of literary consumption, a postcolonial text puts itself at risk of being appropriated as part of a colonial mechanism. Huggan thus considers the 'postcolonial exotic' as the central dilemma of postcolonial studies, since it raises the question of how a postcolonial writer could undermine the hegemonic power of neo-colonialism without also complying with it through the commodification of cultural otherness.

Huggan further describes what he calls 'strategic exoticism' as the way postcolonial thinkers and writers deliberately employ exoticist conventions to serve their political agenda of undermining the 'dominant systems of representation' from within. However, in his view, while this strategy is 'an option', it is not 'a way out' of the postcolonial dilemma mentioned above but a further 'symptom' of it.⁸⁷ Even self-conscious responses to the postcolonial exotic can be but an addition to the circuit of cultural commodification. Using *The Buddha of Suburbia* as a case study, Huggan contends that, although the 'staged marginalities' of the characters, particularly Haroon and Karim, can be obviously seen as

⁸⁵ Yousaf, p. 20.

⁸⁶ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 13-14.

⁸⁷ Huggan, p. 32-33.

a parody of white exoticist perspectives, they simultaneously reveal the characters' complicity with the forces of the market. Making a living from commodifying their own marginalities, they fix themselves in particular positions through repetitive performances. The novel thus ironically emphasises the need to constantly restage one's prescribed identity rather than encouraging changes. Performing marginality strategically here may be seen as 'a reconfirmation of relative powerlessness', observes Huggan, and the book seems unable to offer alternatives to 'a bleakly neo-imperialist realpolitik' as Kureishi's work is often said to do.⁸⁸

A different perspective towards the self-conscious exoticism of postcolonial writers is given in Sarah Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. While Huggan regards such strategic exoticism as the writers' abortive attempt to undermine the hegemonic power, Brouillette calls it a 'touristic conscience' which is a constitutive feature of the postcolonial industry.⁸⁹ Employing touristic metaphor, she argues that Huggan's criticism of the unspecified metropolitan readers, whose expectations are to be undermined by the writers, reveals the guilty symptom permeating in the postcolonial literary field itself. By distinguishing himself from the 'ignorant' market readers, Huggan could identify instead with the responsible tourists, who do not simply exoticise the cultural/racial others. In other words, he authenticates himself, as well as the elite reading group he belongs to, by claiming the position of the insider, like the elite tourist who sneers at the general tourists. Undoubtedly, as Brouillette points out, this particular kind of self-consciousness is 'saleable' and at the same time allows postcolonial thinkers to maintain their privileged positions even as they participate in the consumption and production of postcolonial commodities within the global market.

Brouillette suggests that 'strategic exoticism' should be understood, not as a tool created by the more critical and responsible writers to educate their reader, but as a strategy for both the writer-as-producer, and the reader-as-consumer, to negotiate with the 'touristic guilt' of making profit from the postcolonial society-as-industry.⁹⁰ Her treatment of the term 'exotic' is certainly illuminating; yet, it reveals another problematic assumption prevalent within postcolonial studies. The analogy of the tourist presupposes the mutual understanding among the 'consumers', both professional and general, about their tendency to have guilty pleasure, either responsibly or not, from consuming the racial and cultural others as exotic objects. Given that this insight actually exists, it is unlikely to be

⁸⁸ Huggan, p. 104. Here Huggan draws similarities between Kureishi and Rushdie, and classifies them as 'deeply pessimistic writers'.

⁸⁹ Brouillette, p. 5.

⁹⁰ Brouillette, p. 7.

recognisable for the readers whose social and cultural positions make them more inclined to identify with the represented ‘others’; according to this logic, they are in the position of the ‘consumable’. In other words, Brouillette’s explanation of the postcolonial literary consumption presupposes the white metropolitans at the centre of the Anglophone literary marketplace as tourists. The exotic objects represented by postcolonial writers are thus subjected to commodification only and are not to be regarded as consumers. This notion of fixed positions between the consumer and the consumable, I argue, preempts a more nuanced discussion about postcolonial readers, as well as a reading beyond this ‘touristic guilt’.

According to C. L. Innes, postcolonial writers have a sense of ‘a *double* audience, one existing as an immediate community within or identified with the colonized people, the other an outside or metropolitan readership, often connected with the colonizer’.⁹¹ This observation remarkably coincides with the recognised readership of *The Buddha of Suburbia* as discussed above. Unlike Huggan and Brouillette who look at postcolonial literary consumption in relation to the market, Innes is concerned with the way in which the readers approach the texts. A reader, she argues, is supposed to allow herself ‘to be transformed and translated culturally, entering into dialogue with the work, its implicit readers, and the power relationships between them’.⁹² Her attention to the reader’s active role is undoubtedly valuable; yet, it reaffirms the binary framework of postcolonial literary studies that seems to treat a postcolonial text as a battlefield between two positions that are based on national origins: the racial superior and the racial inferior, according to the history of colonisation. They are put in opposition to each other, fighting and negotiating to either maintain or undermine the hierarchical power that has been in operation since the colonial period. Within this paradigm, the reader outside the battlefield, that is, the one who is not categorised as either coloniser or colonised, can be considered as a ‘peripheral’ reader. She could only engage with the texts from the position of the observer, neither accused of nor excused for exoticising the others because she is not recognised by postcolonial scholars. As I have discussed in the introduction of this thesis, due to the technology of distribution, the readers of so-called postcolonial literature are around the world, but their social and cultural backgrounds might not be seen as relevant to the texts as long as they do not share the similar experiences of colonisation.

It should be noted that, in his critique of the commodification of the postcolonial ‘exotics’, Huggan indeed acknowledges the existence of diverse communities of readers in

⁹¹ C. L. Innes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 201.

⁹² C. L. Innes, p. 208.

the field of postcolonial literary consumption. He rightly points out the heterogeneity of the global reading public in the Anglophone literary world:

And it would be as difficult to distinguish a single reading public as to identify its location, in part because readers of postcolonial works are part of an increasingly diasporised, transnational English-speaking culture, but most of all because literary/cultural audiences all over the world are by their very nature plural and heterogeneous.⁹³

Although he seems to exclude the audience of the works translated from English into other languages, it is evident that Huggan is well aware of the impossibility of confining and containing multiple reading communities within a particular location, and of prescribing their reading frameworks. However, as Brouillette has shown, Huggan bases his main argument on the vague figure of the metropolitan reader, which has never been concretely specified, when discussing the problem of the postcolonial writers' strategic exoticism. Acutely recognising this problematic approach, Brouillette, however, makes a similar assumption about the imagined audiences of postcolonial writers who produce their work for the metropolitan market. Consequently, she addresses the issue of exoticism through the postcolonial framework of binary oppositions between the colonial eyes and the indigenous object of gaze, albeit without a sense of moral superiority of a responsible reader. Ignoring the agency of the 'peripheral' readers, she implicitly confirms the homogeneity of the reading community and normalises the monopoly of the western framework of approaching postcolonial texts.

Though Huggan and Brouillette's insightful arguments about postcolonialism in the context of global capitalism should definitely be borne in mind, their assumption about the metropolitan reader not only hinders transnational reading, but also creates an incomplete dilemma of the writer's commodification of the exotics. The tension between assimilation and resistance deriving from exoticisation occurs only if the reader is the white metropolitan who is in the position to assimilate and to be resisted. In fact, the rarity of reception study within postcolonial literary studies makes it difficult to account for the impact of a postcolonial text upon readers. The power to undermine or challenge colonial hegemony is usually conferred on the text by critics, not by the readers in the market. Therefore, my aim is not to interrogate how the content in *The Buddha of Suburbia* disturbs the power relations between the majority and the minorities in the UK. Instead, I will demonstrate how the novel's self-exoticisation potentially challenges the assumption about the reader of a postcolonial text based on the binary coloniser/colonised, and draws

⁹³ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 30.

attention to the diverse ways of reading based on the different backgrounds of the readers. Considered in the context of global capitalism, this way of approaching the text can be seen as a disruption to the monopoly of reading and interpreting the text as an international product exercised by postcolonial scholars.

Karim's audience and their multiple readings

Karim's theatrical performances exemplify different reactions of their audience, that in turn reflect diverse dispositions of readers of a particular text which cannot be easily classified under the binary consumer/consumable. Cast as Mowgli in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Karim has to put a brown cream on his body and an Indian accent on his British English. This situation is obviously a reflection on the self-exoticisation of the racial 'other' that is conditioned by the market. In order to gain a position in the theatrical production, Karim has to impose on himself the identity he actually finds alienating. His family and friends' different responses to his performance implicate how this self-exoticisation might be received by different kinds of readers. While his white mother weeps 'with pride' and keeps praising the show as 'really professional' (p. 156), his father, seeing the play on another occasion with Eva, Jamila and Changez, is infuriated. As mentioned earlier, Haroon calls it a 'Bloody half-cocked business' and strongly opposes the 'bloody fucker Mr Kipling's version of India. Eva, who avoids mentioning the role Karim will play when she introduces Karim to the director, comments on nothing except Karim's 'assured' future. Changez enjoys it as a generic entertainment, while Jamila thinks it is 'disgusting' and 'completely neo-fascist' (p. 157).

After this performance, Karim has an opportunity to join another theatre group led by Pyke, and is assigned to create his own character based on people he knows. He first picks Anwar, Jamila's father, but later chooses Changez to be his model character. The performance is a success, 'with four hundred white English people looking at [Karim]', and critics agree that he is 'hilarious and honest' (p. 228). This is evidently an anticipation of the metropolitan reader's reaction towards the artist's self-exoticisation. However, his mother reacts differently from when she saw *The Jungle Book*. Instead of appreciating her son's bigger success, she insists that Karim is an Englishman not an Indian, refusing to acknowledge the truth that he is half-Indian. Eva, by contrast, favourably reads the whole play as a truthful commentary on England: 'It was about this country... about how callous and bereft of grace we've become. It blew away the self-myth of tolerant, decent England' (p. 228-229). For Changez, whose character is performed by Karim, he applauds it as 'very

good plays and top playing'. To Karim's surprise, he does not even realise that the role is modelled on him, not the character of Karim himself:

And listen to my criticism. I am glad in your part you kept it fundamentally autobiographical and didn't try the leap of invention into my character. You realized clearly that I am not a person who could be successfully impersonated. (p. 231)

The exoticised characters that Karim plays, be it Mowgli or Changez, are seen both by the members of the white British, Margaret and Eva, and by members of British ethnic minorities, Haroon, Changez and Jamila. They are all consumers of commercialised narratives, and their different reactions to each performance reveal more about themselves than the content and significance of the plays. Margaret's different responses to Karim's different performances as accounted above reveal her as an English working-class bigot who, despite having an Indian husband, bares the trace of racial prejudice. She can enjoy Karim's rendition of Mowgli, even though the role is totally alienating for him, possibly because it reproduces the far-fetched fantasy about the Orientals that seems to have nothing associated with the present-day British society and its members. In contrast, Changez's character, an ordinary Indian whom Margaret might often encounter in her daily life, reminds her of Karim's racial heritage from his Indian father that threatens to contaminate the racial purity of the white British people. Huggan regards Margaret's reaction as a fear that "Englishness", like "Indianness", might be an inherently unstable entity; that national identities might be reinvented, and identity itself continually reperformed'.⁹⁴ Margaret's prejudice, however, cannot be generalised as representative of all members of the majority. More likely, it indicates her social background as a suburban woman who has not yet come to terms with the new social reality. Living in a nosy, narrow-minded neighbourhood, she is enraged when her Indian husband practices for the yoga Olympics with the windows open. It is also possible that she can tolerate him because of his class background that differentiates him from 'the swarms of Indian peasants' that cannot use cutlery and toilets (p. 24). This is related to the issue of racial discrimination among working-class people that is also illustrated in the novel. Hairy Back, the racist father of Karim's girlfriend, as well as his school friends who bully him and other 'black' students, are further examples. Karim himself also observes that 'the proletariat of the suburbs did have strong class feeling. It was virulent and hate-filled and directed entirely at the people beneath them' (p. 149).⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 98.

⁹⁵ This race and class intersection is also a major issue in *Anita and Me*. A remarkable difference between the two books is that, while *Anita* focuses on the protagonist's escape from the working-class environment, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is interested in explaining how it contributes to Karim's self-formation.

Unlike Margaret, Eva, another white audience member, has no comment about Mowgli, but is thrilled by another performance. Her family is better off than Margaret's, with a house near Beckenham High Street with 'bay windows, an attic, a greenhouse, three bedrooms and central heating' (p. 8). As a sophisticated middle-class woman who reads Capote and Voltaire, she knows how to 'read' Pike's play as social commentary. Her well-articulated interpretation sounds convincing even though we know almost nothing about the plot of the play. Eva seems to be a more 'responsible' reader than Margaret, since she can go beyond racial prejudice and criticise her own country. Nonetheless, her actual treatment of racial 'otherness' reveals her as an ideal member of the capitalist society who can turn everything into a commodity. She knows that Karim's Indianness is saleable and helps him to get the role of Mowgli though she is fully aware of him being labelled as exotic. She also does the same with Haroon, whose 'Oriental' spirituality draws many desperate British customers. Even the decorations in her house are masterfully chosen to signify her multicultural awareness, which will help her climb the social ladder. Therefore, her ability to 'understand' the message in the play does not necessarily mean she is one of the few middle-class Britons who would actively resist racism and other forms of social discrimination beyond the cultural aspect. Rather, she knows very well how to use her cultural capital to express herself appropriately and how to manipulate things around her in order to achieve the highest profit.

Due to their origins, Haroon and Changez are, to some extent, closer to the position of the consumable than other characters. Both of them were born in India and have spent a considerable amount of time there. However, they do not identify themselves with the exotic. Haroon hates *The Jungle Book* performance for its misrepresentation of the Indians, but he criticises it from the distant position of the consumer in the UK who feels he knows more than the white metropolitan audience. He is similar to Eva in terms of his ability to commodify cultural narratives in order to gain benefit. Dismissing Kipling's portrayal of the Indians as primitive, Haroon embraces the stereotype of the East as mystical and spiritual, and establishes himself as a suburban Buddha. He chooses to consume and to be consumed however and whenever he prefers. Unlike Haroon, Changez seems to be totally unaware of what is going on around him. This physically disabled Indian who has just arrived in England is unwittingly put in the position of the consumable by Karim and does not even realise it. Furthermore, he mistakes the dramatisation of his own life on stage for Karim's autobiography. Unable to recognise the ideological implication of the first performance and to distinguish between Karim and himself in the second one, he might be seen as a newcomer to England who is utterly ignorant of the racial politics in the country.

At the same time, Changez is a good consumer of popular cultural products of England and America. When asked by Karim about his reading preferences, he answers enthusiastically that he likes the ‘classics’, which means P.G. Wodehouse and Conan Doyle, not Virgil, Dante or Homer. Also, he is fond of the Saint, Mickey Spillane and Westerns films. Changez can thus also represent a general reader in the global market, who is overwhelmed by western narratives even before he leaves India. These narratives shape his taste and perception, as well as the way he consumes the portrayal of himself. That might explain why he cannot differentiate his own character from Karim’s; he sees it like the westerners see all Indians in representations as a collective entity, though in real life he still believes in his own uniqueness as if he was not a part of the product he consumes.

As a British-born member of the minority community, Jamila can naturally assume different positions from Haroon and Changez. Though physically similar to the consumable, she is totally different from the Indian-born characters in terms of her lifestyle, attitudes, and beliefs. Remarkably, Jamila’s response to *The Jungle Book* derives from her position as a political activist rather than an Indian. She uses the term ‘neo-fascism’ to describe the play, which relates to the wider aspect of English society at that moment, when the National Front, the far-right fascist party, was growing in popularity and power. Her political stance is reemphasised in her conversation with Karim after his second performance. She is furious not about what Karim has done on stage, but about what he has not done off stage. Karim promised to join the march against the National Front after Changez had been injured by its members, but he did not. Jamila thus seems to prefer to fight in the real, political world to the world of narratives. Also, her and Karim’s different position-taking, despite their similarity as second-generation immigrants, underlines the discrepancy between the politics of representation and the politics on the street, as well as their ideological stance and political engagement.⁹⁶

Evidently, the examination of the audience’s reception of the self-exoticising performances renders visible the different positions of the ‘fictional’ readers in relation to the text and other readers. Instead of finding the meaning and the intended effect of the text, it shifts attention to the reason why a particular text is received differently. This reveals multifaceted inequality among readers as consumers, not between the consumer and the consumable. Margaret and Eva have different opinions because they belong to different social positions even though they are both white Britons. As a working-class woman living in the suburbs, Margaret lacks sufficient information to understand the social condition of

⁹⁶ Karim and Jamila’s different courses of action can be seen as a commentary on the political role of the writer. However, the question is not about the effectiveness of a postcolonial narrative in undermining the colonial hegemony as raised by Huggan, but about the relevance of literature to the political world.

her own country. Eva, in contrast, has more opportunities to accumulate her social and cultural capital that helps her adjust to the social reality for her own benefit. Haroon, Changez and Jamila are Indians by ethnicity but relate to the performances differently because of their unequal knowledge and different political stances. Haroon as a suburban immigrant does not care much about racial stereotyping as long as it is economically beneficial; Changez as an ill-informed admirer of western culture is a real victim of racial prejudice, but, due to his lack of political education, he does not realise the connection between such prejudice and the narratives he consumes; Jamila as an educated activist is well aware of the problems in the performances but chooses to fight against the discrimination in the real world. All these positions indicate the impossibility of collectively assuming the identity of readers of a particular text. They can come with various backgrounds and stances, and thus cannot be easily categorised even by such a broad and seemingly neutral terms as coloniser/colonised or consumer/consumable. As this variety results in different reactions towards the same 'text', it is hardly feasible to discuss the effect of a postcolonial text upon the readers without considering their background. The meaning of the content always depends on the reception of its reader. If the goals of postcolonial writing and literary studies are to undermine racial hierarchical structure, eradicate prejudice and build understanding between people with different origins, the framework of coloniser/colonised and the consumer/consumable in literary representation might not work. The unequal status and uneven distribution of knowledge and opportunities among the readers has to be realised and dealt with, which means that other aspects of social inequality should be considered together with the racial problems. This work can possibly be done through the study of both the implied and the real readers who may or may not be recognised within the postcolonial interpretive communities.

While the novel actually demonstrates only its possible reception in England, it also has potential to engage a wider readership. Through the narration of Karim, the reader is exposed to the fictional world of intersectional relations that invite identification from different social and political positions. As a mediator between the story and the reader, Karim is not just a racialised subject; he occupies contingent positions that defy strictly racialised readings or postcolonial politicisation. His narration interpellates the reader as both the insider and the outsider; the victim and the victimiser; the powerful and the powerless, depending on each particular circumstance. At times, the narrator and the reader are in the same position as the consumer, destroying the boundary between the consumer and consumable along with the notion of the author as a representative of his ethnic group. Through these positions the reader is invited to take, she could reflect on her positions

within her own social and cultural context, as well as in relation to the characters as members of the same unequal world.

Realising oneself in the system: On the multiplicity of identification

As mentioned earlier, in the context of global capitalism, postcolonial literature as a cultural product can travel around the world. The lack of recognition of the ‘peripheral reader’, or the global reader outside the existing field of postcolonial literary studies, not only limits the way in which a postcolonial text is read, but also implicates postcolonial thinkers’ tendency to monopolise the interpretation. A possible way out is to examine, not the political significance of the text for a specific group of readers, but the points of identification that it makes available for the potential readers regardless of their social and cultural affiliations. The narrator can be seen as a mediator between the narrative and the reader, not between community insiders and outsiders. Instead of relying on the realist effect that grants him the authority of the insider, Karim invites the reader to take part in the narrative through the process of interpellation.

When engaging with a literary text, a reader quite naturally identifies with certain characters, most usually the protagonist, and absorbs their views and set of values almost unnoticeably. What is distinctive about *The Buddha of Suburbia* is that the reader is led into the world of Karim, the narrator who is unable to really commit himself to anything. More importantly, although Karim is a member of the minority group, he explicitly states his unreliability as the narrator of the story about the community. He puts himself in the position of the consumer, just like the reader, who is compelled to realise that there is nothing authentic to be consumed here. Furthermore, instead of summoning the reader to fully identify with him, Karim alternately pulls and pushes her, drawing a line where some identifications are impossible. The reader who is familiar with easy identification, especially with loveable protagonists, may find it difficult to relate herself to him; as a result, she could instead reflect on her own positions in relation to Karim and other characters, which are not stable, but subject to change according to different circumstances.

Firstly, Karim encourages the reader to identify with his lack of knowledge about his Indian part/past. In the following passage, he gives an account of his father and Anwar’s luxurious life in Bombay with an ambiguous voice, narrowing the proximity between him and the reader by turning himself into a consumer of the narrative:

At weekends they played cricket, and after school there was tennis on the family court. The servants would be ball-boys. The cricket matches were often against the British, and *you* had to let them win. There were also constant riots and

demonstrations and Hindu-Muslim fighting. *You'd find your Hindu friends and neighbours chanting obscenities outside your house.* (p. 23, my emphasis)

Since Karim never has such experiences, he is certainly not the real teller of the story. This past must have been told to him by his father or Anwar, so the pronoun 'you' in the quotation addresses not only the reader, the silent audience of Karim the narrator, but also Karim himself when listening to it. This ambiguous voice interpellates the reader into the story, not just as the outside observer but in the same position as the narrator. Even though he has an Indian father, Karim knows little more about Indian culture and history than readers with different backgrounds and origins. In other words, he is also the consumer of the narrative of his father, not unlike the readers. Therefore, those readers do not feel excluded for their lack of shared experiences and can focus on the present tangible consequences of the past rather than an irrevocable history.

When confronting the residue of the 'old' culture, Karim has a different, authoritative voice, and addresses the reader for a different effect. Failing to convince Anwar to quit his Gandhian 'non-violent' diet to force his daughter to marry an unknown Indian, Karim declares to the reader:

Anwar's irrationality was making me tremble, I can tell *you*. I knew I kept shaking my head everywhere. He'd locked himself in the private room beyond the reach of reason, of persuasion, of evidence. Even happiness, that frequent pivot of decision, was irrelevant here—Jamila's happiness, I mean. Like her I wanted to express myself physically in some way. It seemed to be all that was left to us. (p. 60, my emphasis)

Here Karim shares with the reader his inability to understand actions and values of Anwar, who is the first-generation immigrant. Telling Anwar that his behaviour is 'old-fashioned', 'out of date' and 'no one does that kind of thing now' (p. 60), Karim identifies himself with Jamila as second-generation members of the minorities, and tell 'you', the reader, how irrational Anwar is. It is remarkable that Karim assumes that the anonymous 'you' might have the same set of values as him, that is, privileging personal choice over the elder's order. This emphasises the implied closeness between the narrator and the reader, as well as the distance between the narrator and the culture that supposedly forms a part of himself. Evidently, the narrator is not the insider bridging the gap between different cultures, but the citizen of the modern world witnessing a drama that he cannot make sense of. The reader, thus, becomes the absent audience that functions as the companion from the outside world whom Karim can identify with, and at the same time, identifies with him in observing and judging the situations in the book through his subjective eyes. In other words, she shares

with him the cosmopolitan space in the modern world in which the residue of the old world still affects their lives.

Nevertheless, the gap between Karim and the reader is not reduced to the extent that the latter fully identifies with the story and believes that she can resolve all social and cultural differences between herself and Karim through reading. Karim's accounts of his first-hand experiences of racial and social oppression keep some readers at a certain distance, reminding them of the persistent discrepancy between the observers and the victims:

We did a lot of woodwork at our school, and the other kids liked to lock me and my friends in the storeroom and have us chant 'Manchester United, Manchester United, we are the boot boys' as they held chisels to our throats and cut off our shoelaces. We did a lot of woodwork at the school because they didn't think we could deal with books. (p. 63, my emphasis)

This incident interestingly demonstrates intersectional issues of class and race in school. Though Karim does not give full information about the backgrounds of his 'friends' and 'the other kids', his earlier account that he is sick of being called 'Shitface' and 'Curryface' implies that he and his friends are bullied because they are racially inferior to the other students. However, the pronoun 'we' who 'did a lot of wood work at our school' refers to both the abused and the abusers in the previous sentence; 'they' in the last sentence does not denote the racially superior but the adults who do not believe that these kids in such a school, black and white alike, have sufficient intellect to study. Therefore, while Karim and his friends are 'lower' than the other kids in terms of race, all of them are in the same position as suburban children who are seen as going nowhere. Sharing unpleasant experiences with both the minorities and the white suburban kids who also contribute to his suffering, Karim interpellates the readers into multiple positions at the same time, but does not coerce them into the act of identifying in a uniform way. How the readers could relate to Karim's experiences essentially depends on their social positions. This connection (or disconnection), evidently, is not exclusively reserved for any particular ethnic group. Conversely, even readers who share an ethnic identity with Karim could feel alienated from his experiences if they belong to an urban middle-class family. In this particular situation, they are the outsiders, witnessing the injustice that they could neither share nor intervene to stop.

The fact that Karim has both the outsider's viewpoint and the insider's suffering shared with his ill-treated school friends makes perceptible his sense of (un)belonging to both of the worlds in which he lives. While he might have the same values and attitudes as

those in the so-called *new* world, he cannot fully fit in with it due to the *old* embedded discrimination. He appears to be a member of the global community in one way and of a disenfranchised minority group in another. As for the reader, the tension between being included in and excluded from Karim's world reminds her of their similarities as human beings as well as the social differences of each individual that make one have less opportunities in life than another. This effect can be considered a result of what Suzanne Keen calls 'broadcast strategic empathy' that 'calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes'.⁹⁷ However, I would argue that what we have in common are not just the abstract aspects of human beings, but the shared experiences of subjection to the material condition of the unequal world, albeit from different positions. Within this world, it is impossible that we all suffer the same degree of 'vulnerabilities'.

The novel does not simply arouse the reader's passive empathy through the distance between her and Karim; it also repeatedly evokes in her the feeling of guilt through Karim's inability to make society better. Seeing the world through Karim's eyes, the reader is held captive inside the body of a young man who cannot do anything for other people. Hearing about the tragedy of Gene, Eleanor's dead West Indian boyfriend, for example, Karim can only say 'I see' as a response:

Matthew says he was the best mime he ever met. But he never got the work he deserved. [...] He played criminals and taxi-drivers. [...] The police were always picking him up and giving him a going over. Taxis drove straight past him. People said there were no free tables in empty restaurants. (p. 201)

Compared to Karim, Gene struggles more, suffers more, but gets dramatically less opportunity. Here Karim is the audience, the same position as the reader of his narrative, witnessing the suffering of others without being able to help. These unequal opportunities among characters, especially those who are apparently in the same position as minorities, render even more pronounced the intersectional relationship between people's conflicting social statuses. This complexity makes it more difficult for a person to identify with a victim of a particular situation, even if they shared the same social or cultural positions. When Jamila is forced to marry Changez, Karim as a male member of the same ethnic community cannot share her suffering, and may even be said to take part in this gender oppression by allowing it to continue. Thoughtful as he is, he has no idea at all when it comes to such domestic violence:

⁹⁷ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 142.

‘What are you going to do, Jammie?’
 ‘I don’t know. What do you suggest?’
 ‘I don’t know either’. (p. 61)

More significantly, when considering the whole interwoven relations of characters in the novel, we can see that the boundary between the oppressor and the oppressed is actually blurred. Karim is guilty of reproducing racial stereotypes in *The Jungle Book* performance; his mother is guilty of enjoying it as a ‘tourist’; while Haroon as an Indian seems to be the victim of labelling. Yet, in another context where the power hierarchy is different, Haroon as a man is guilty of leaving Margaret to pursue his own happiness. Evidently, a victim can also be a victimiser in different circumstances. In addition, sometimes oppressing the inferior other is a way to escape one’s own inferiority. As a white working-class woman, Margaret is proud of her husband’s aristocratic background that enables her to look down upon working-class people, white and black alike.

In the end, what is worth questioning is not just a particular instance of oppression but the whole network of social injustice in which almost everyone is an accomplice in one way or another. This is where the world of the text and the world of the reader meet. The characters’ multidimensional points of identification allow the reader to identify with different characters in different aspects. She can locate herself into the network of power relations and reflexively conceives of her relative positions among the others. Thus, though the differences between the characters and the reader in terms of national and historical background are not erased (and in fact should not be), they exist in the same web of relations that together maintain various forms of oppression in the world. This way of approaching the text might be useful for a ‘responsible’ reader, not because it allows her to gain ‘authentic’ experiences from reading, but because it enables her to understand herself in intersection with other people as parts of the same world, regardless of their social or cultural origins.

In chapter 2-4, I look at the “centric-eccentric” novels whose receptions, both inside and outside postcolonial academia, make visible different kinds of what I collectively, but not exclusively, call peripheral readers. My discussion of Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* in the next chapter calls into question the celebratory reading of the novel as a success story of an immigrant in multicultural Britain. Comparable to *The Buddha of Suburbia* for its portrayal of the second-generation British Asian protagonist’s self-development, the novel engages more explicitly with identity politics, and hence generates a scholarly reception that overshadows the aspect of the book that might resonate with the potential readers at the *local* periphery, that are the white working-class. I would argue that the emphasis on the

issue of cultural identity in the British context not only implicitly excludes the working-class perspective, but also prevents the novel from reaching a wider audience outside Britain. Drawing attention to the peripheral perspectives of the rural villagers in the West Midlands, I illustrate how *Anita and Me* could be read intersectionally as an articulation of inequality under capitalism, the condition that could be shared by readers around the world, especially those at the global economic peripheries.

Chapter Two

Voices of the Tollingtons: Rereading *Anita and Me(ena)*'s peripherality

Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* is arguably the most 'local' in the local/global spectrum of literary location compared to other novels examined in this thesis. While Syal could be considered a household name as a comedian and a playwright among British audiences, she is relatively unknown outside the UK. Unlike Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali's works that have successfully reached international markets, both in the original language and in translation, Syal's novels are barely recognised by most general readers of English literature around the world. Interestingly, though, *Anita and Me* has recently gained considerable attention from literary academics outside the UK and the US, possibly pointing to the time lag of postcolonial theoretical transport between the English literary centre and its peripheries. In this chapter, I will consider how such postcolonial concepts as proposed by Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha, emerging in metropolitan academia during the early 1990s, affect the way the novel is read in international academic fields. This theoretical import, it can be argued, renders imperceptible the intersectional dimension of class and race inequality available in the text. Additionally, the treatment of the novel as a portrayal of the 'new' cultural identity of the Black British in the UK, though certainly credible, removes the story from the social context of the West Midlands during the 1960s in which it is set. I contend that *Anita and Me* incorporates in its narrative the perspective of the white working-class whose lives are affected most by England's deindustrialisation. Brought back to the context where class and race forcefully intersect, it has the potential to engage both the readers at the *local* and the *global* peripheries. Both the English working-class and potential readers outside the UK are 'peripheral' culturally and economically, that is to say, in the global literary marketplace and in the world-system dominated by global capitalism. The local perspective, therefore, could resonate with the global one, albeit in different degree and scales.

Anita and Me (1996) was published at the moment of a 'big explosion' of British Asian artists⁹⁸ and won a Betty Trask Award.⁹⁹ It was adapted into a film in 2002 (directed

⁹⁸ Sabrina Broadbent, 'Anita and Me: An Interview with Meera Syal', *The English & Media Magazine*, 39 (Autumn, 1998), 4-8, p 8.

⁹⁹ Betty Trask Award is provided by the Society of Authors, given to the first novels of writers who are Commonwealth citizens under the age of 35. It is compulsory that the eligible novels are of 'a romantic or traditional nature', not experimental. Interestingly, though, Zadie Smith and Hari Kunzru received the prize for their first novels as well, even though the fact is not usually mentioned when their works are introduced to the public. See <http://www.societyofauthors.org/betty-trask>.

by Metin Hüseyin and written by Meera Syal) and into a stage play in 2015.¹⁰⁰ Meera Syal, whose childhood experiences as a British-Indian girl growing up in the West Midlands during the late 1960s hugely influence her writing, was already an accomplished actress and screenwriter by the time she wrote the book. Since she is known as a comedian, it is possible that her writing, funny and witty as it is, is not taken as seriously as it should be. In addition, her protagonists are deliberately deviated from the representation of 'typical' Asian women during the high tide of political correctness in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁰¹ They are confident and fearless women, not helpless victims of external circumstances such as their patriarchal society, and thus could be difficult to locate into the 1990s' postcolonial literary category. Nonetheless, she is evidently a pioneer for people aspiring to create their own voices, speak for their communities, and pursue their career goals. Nosheen Iqbal claims that she is 'one of the first and most famous of her generation of British Asians to impact mainstream culture,' indicating that Syal is well-known not just among minorities from a South Asian background, but among the British public as a whole.¹⁰² *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), the film directed by Gurinder Chadha and written by Syal, is considered 'one of the first British Asian films that spoke for British Asian women'.¹⁰³ Syal also co-created and starred in the BBC's sketch comedy show, *Goodness Gracious Me* (1996-2001), and had a major role in the series *The Kumars at No. 42* (2001-2004), both of which were highly successful.

Like many debut novels, *Anita* is partly autobiographical. It is set in the late 1960s in a fictional village called Tollington, near Wolverhampton, where the majority of the population are members of the white working class who relied economically on the village's mine until its closure in the late fifties. The protagonist, Meena, is an unconventional British Indian girl, who is disobedient and feisty. She loves to invent lies in order to feel the sense of adventure that she thinks she lacks as a member of a middle-class Punjabi family living in mundane surroundings. According to the author, her

¹⁰⁰ The stage adaptation by Tanika Gupta was first shown at Birmingham Repertory Theatre and then transferred to Theatre Royal Stratford East, London. This same production had its UK tour, starting at Wolverhampton, in early 2017. See the details of the cast, dates and venues at the official website <http://theatrecloud.com/anita-and-me>.

¹⁰¹ Meera Syal, "PC: GLC" in *The War of Words: The Political Correctness Debate*, ed. by Sarah Dunant (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 116-132 (p. 125).
ed. by Philip Laplace and Éric Tabuteau (Besançon: Presses Universitaires Franc-Comtoises, 2003), pp. 113-30 (p. 120).

¹⁰² Nosheen Iqbal, 'Meera Syal on Comedy, Wife-Swapping and Rebellion', *Guardian*, 25 October 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/oct/25/meera-syal-on-comedy-wife-swapping-and-rebellion>> [accessed 20 June 2017].

¹⁰³ Rachel Dwyer, 'Honorary Doctorate: Ms Meera Syal MBE', *SOAS University of London*, 24 April 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6HfjGLcrNo>> [accessed 20 June 2017].

friendship with Anita, a twelve-year old white and unruly girl, is the ‘spine’ of the novel.¹⁰⁴ The girls become co-leaders of a ‘gang’ comprised of younger children in the village, with Meena as deputy, before turning into enemies when the tension between their friendship and expressions of racism in the village reaches an exploding point. Meena realises that people of her skin colour are considered by her white friends to be naturally inferior and hence deserving of abuse. At the end of the novel, Meena succeeds in getting into a grammar school, an achievement no one in the village has had for a decade, and leaves the deteriorating community behind.

Meena as a racialised subject: on the limit of interpretation

Unlike many other works about the racial ‘others’ in the literary marketplace, *Anita and Me* focuses on the personal growth of a child protagonist, a subject that tourist readers, who would expect ‘exotic’ stories told by the native informant, might not be very enthusiastic about. Moreover, because it is set in the Midlands rather than in metropolitan London, the novel has a strong local resonance that is not very representative of Britain from the point of view of outsiders. As James Procter argues, like *The Buddha of Suburbia*, *Anita and Me* is ‘peripheral to those uncompromisingly urban ‘centres’ of black cultural production’ in terms of its suburban setting.¹⁰⁵ Apart from the author’s own childhood experiences, a reason for the distinctiveness of the book’s subject and setting might be its intended readership. Talking about the novel in her recent interview with Rana Mitter, Syal names the lack of British texts that ‘resonate with stuff [she was] going through’ as her inspiration.¹⁰⁶ While she had opportunities to read works from such Black American authors as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Ralph Ellison, she could not find books about Black British protagonists of her generation. In this light, *Anita and Me* appears to be primarily written for young British Asians growing up in the 1960s-70s who found themselves unrepresented in the mainstream media. However, as Syal noticed from letters she received from fans of the book, in addition to British Asians, her readers also include white working-class people who feel nostalgic about their childhood illustrated in the novel. Therefore, it can be said that the actual readers of the novel, as suggested by responses given directly to the author, are those ‘peripheral’ demographics in the UK in terms of race and class. This could partly explain why the novel is not very successful in the global arena. Since it does not possess a ‘central’ spot in the local market

¹⁰⁴ Broadbent, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁶ Meera Syal, ‘Meera Syal and Tanika Gupta in Conversation at Birmingham Rep’, *BBC*, 15 October 2015 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06gt257>> [accessed 20 June 2017].

of such a literary centre as the UK which is dominated by white middle class readers, it is unlikely that the novel reaches global audiences, whose tastes are mainly determined by their local markets which in turn rely heavily on the global literary centre.

Despite its initial peripherality, as a novel of formation representing a British Asian perspective, *Anita and Me* has become a part of the British educational establishment as a GCSE set text, thus reaching wider audiences than Syal may have originally intended.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, despite her attempt to fill the gap in British literature from a viewpoint of a British South Asian, Syal herself has repeatedly emphasised the novel's 'universal' quality for its reminiscences of childhood experiences: 'In the end, unless you're writing something that resonates on a universal scale, it's not going to work. I've had letters from old white women saying, "This is exactly my childhood"'.¹⁰⁸ In her recent interview, when asked by an audience about her 'intention' when writing the book, Syal said that, apart from creating an alternative British history, she wants to inspire 'all the kids' who feel 'different and isolated'.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, the 'universal' experiences that probably appeal to young readers come together with the novel's specific quality as a Black British text that represents minority voices serving to promote the multicultural image of Britain. As Sissy Helff observes:

In her examination of identity and migrant selfhood, Syal charts such territory as transculturality, migrancy, and heritage, while employing strategic ethnic pigeonholing which ties in well with the discourse of multicultural Britain since the mid-1990s'.¹¹⁰

As seen in study guides for the English Literature GCSE, Meena's circumstances as a black girl, living in a white community and facing racial prejudice, are considered as keys to the understanding of the text.¹¹¹ It is also noteworthy that, due to its optimistic tone, the novel appears to be more accessible and acceptable for both ethnic majority and minority readers than Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), although both

¹⁰⁷ The most recent awarding body that included *Anita* in its GCSE English Literature syllabus is OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations), one of the biggest examination boards in the UK. See Graeme Paton, 'More British writers in new English literature GCSEs', *Telegraph*, 28 May 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10861214/More-British-writers-in-new-English-literature-GCSEs.html>> [accessed 20 June 2017].

¹⁰⁸ James Rampton, 'TV Eye: No More Mrs Patel for Meera', *Independent*, 11 April 1997 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/tv-eye-no-more-mrs-patel-for-meera-1266781.html>> [accessed 20 Jun 2017].

¹⁰⁹ Syal, 'Meera Syal and Tanika Gupta in Conversation at Birmingham Rep'.

¹¹⁰ Sissy Helff, *Unreliable Truths: Transcultural Homeworlds in Indian Women's Fiction of the Diaspora*, *Cross/Cultures* 155 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 117.

¹¹¹ See Susan Elkin, *Philip Allan Literature Guide (for GCSE): Anita and Me* (Deddington: Philip Allan, 2010) and Alison Smith, *Oxford Literature Companions: Anita & Me* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

can be categorised as *Bildungsroman* (see chapter 1). As Anita Roy points out, while *The Buddha of Suburbia* ‘descends to bleak, biting satire’, *Anita* treats both the English and Indian communities with ‘affection’.¹¹² Readers from both ethnic demographics do not necessarily feel intimidated by the narrative even though it deals explicitly with the issue of racism in Britain. Moreover, engaging with the experiences of Indian immigrants, the novel has also drawn attention from readers in the subcontinent. It is received warmly by Amrit Dhillon from *India Today* who concludes that Syal’s success, according to what is told in the novel, lies in ‘her parents’ faith in their values, identity and culture’.¹¹³ While this last reading suggests an interestingly nationalistic and selective way of seeing the text, *Anita*, considered by Monika Fludernik as an immigration novel, appears to be able to communicate with Indian readers in the host and the home countries as well as non-Indian English readers.¹¹⁴

Considering the number of academic responses to the book, both specifically and in passing as a reference, we could say that *Anita and Me* has assumed considerable importance in contemporary English literary history. The status of the novel as a *Bildungsroman* is one of the most discussed issues among the book’s critics and reviewers.¹¹⁵ Its critical position regarding the ideological assumptions of the *Bildungsroman* narrative remains debatable, depending on how critics interpret the novel’s plot. Ana Maria Sanchez-Arce, for example, argues that ‘Meena has not exited the frame of *Bildungsroman* and teenage fantasies’, since she finally grows ‘out of Tollington and into visibility’.¹¹⁶ In other words, Meena follows the same path as her *Bildungsroman* precursors, departing from the place that limits her growth to the new one where she can find opportunities to better herself. By contrast, Shoene-Harwood likens the novel to Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, contending that Syal experiments with the ‘anti-Bildung mode of hybrid self-authentication’ by making Meena resist the

¹¹² Anita Roy, ‘Tollington Lasses’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 April 1996, p. 26.

¹¹³ Amrit Dhillon, ‘Life in Exile: Meera Syal’s Childhood Days’, *India Today*, 15 March 1996 <<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/book-review-of-meera-syal-anita-and-me/1/280964.html>> [accessed 20 Jun 2017].

¹¹⁴ Monika Fludernik, ‘Imagined Communities as Imaginary Homelands: The South-Asian Diaspora in Fiction’ in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments*, ed. by Monika Fludernik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp 261-85.

¹¹⁵ For examples, Berthold Schoene-Harwood, ‘Beyond (T) race: Bildung and Proprioception in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 34.1 (1999), 159-68; Mark Stein, *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004); Graeme Dunphy, ‘Meena’s Mockingbird: from Harper Lee to Meera Syal’, *Neophilologus*, 88.4 (2004), 637-659; Sissy Helff, ‘Growing Up in Transcultural Diasporic Worlds’, in *Unreliable Truths*, pp. 107-46; Maneet Kaur, ‘Reading Cultural Hybridity in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*’, *Literary Endeavour*, 6.1 (2015), 9-14.

¹¹⁶ Ana María Sánchez-Arce, ‘Invisible Cities: Being and Creativity in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* and Ben Okri’s *Astonishing the Gods*’ in *Cities on the Margin/ On the Margin of Cities: Representations of Urban Space in Contemporary British and Irish Fiction*, ed. by Philip Laplace and Éric Tabuteau (Besançon: Presses Universitaires Franc-Comtoises, 2003), pp. 113-30 (p. 120).

frame of *Bildung* that ‘induces the self to perceive its own being as imbalanced, inferior and incongruent to a certain hegemonic ideal’.¹¹⁷ In this respect, Meena is seen as defying social norms, not conforming to them in order to be accepted. These two different interpretations remarkably derive from different ways of looking at Meena’s progress. The first one considers Meena’s physical movement while the second one looks at her emotional growth. It should also be noticed that the ‘hegemonic ideal’ in this context refers specifically to the racist discourse, which marginalises brown people like Meena as racialised subjects. The same logic of resistance will not necessarily apply to other kinds of ideal, such as economic progress.

In *Black British Literature: Novels of Transformation*, Mark Stein analyses the dynamic relationship between Black British *Bildungsromane* and the society from which they originate. He argues that *Anita and Me*, following the formula of the genre, has performative functions; that is, it not only portrays the growth of the protagonist in tandem with the change of the society she lives in, but, as a cultural product, the novel also brings about such change. Discovering the mysterious landlord of the ‘Big House’ who turns out to be an Indian man, Meena realises that people like her can possess wealth, and thus makes this new subject position ‘conceivable’ for the readers.¹¹⁸ Moreover, through the confrontation with Sam at the end of the novel, Meena exerts black British cultural power by ‘judging Sam within *her* categories of knowledge’, which results in Sam seeing himself as ‘other’.¹¹⁹ In other words, she reverses the power relations between herself and Sam, representative of the dominant culture of the majority, by exercising her superiority as a British Indian girl over him. Informed by Stuart Hall’s analysis of the ‘othering’ process, Stein’s argument is concerned, not with the ideological implications of the genre, but with the functions of the black British novels of formation to normalise the power of the black British culture in the real society. While it remains questionable how this impact can be verified, what is particularly interesting in this assumption is the emphasis on the importance of culture. If a reader changes her cultural viewpoint, Stein seems to say, her social reality will change accordingly. This argument appears to reflect the influence of the ‘cultural turn’, the intellectual movement prevalent in the global academia during the 1980s-90s in which Hall is one of the leading scholars.

Most of the existing scholarly discussion of *Anita and Me* as a *Bildungsroman* focuses chiefly on Meena’s growth as a racialised subject. These responses indicate the

¹¹⁷ Schoene-Harwood, pp. 160, 164.

¹¹⁸ Stein, p. 38.

¹¹⁹ Stein, p. 51.

dominant way of reading the text as a representative of ethnic minority experiences. This tendency arguably coincides with the emergence of postcolonial theoretical perspectives during the early 1990s and their development in metropolitan literary criticism. Stuart Hall's studies of cultural identity and Homi Bhabha's elaboration on the concept of hybridity, particularly, appear to be compatible with *Anita's* presentation of diasporic experiences and has been used repeatedly as theoretical tools to read the novel, first by critics in the metropolises¹²⁰ and later by those outside them.¹²¹ Schoene-Harwood, for example, although at first seeming to be sceptical about Bhabha's celebration of hybrid identity when applied to Meena's experiences, concludes with an affirmative statement that strongly resonates with the poststructuralist play of language and signification:

Meena's hybrid potential turns out to be a considerable advantage after all, providing her with a cosmopolitan vision of the future and enabling her to discard what used to determine and divide her. Her identity has moved on ... is moving ... beyond (t)race.¹²²

Also influenced by Bhabha, Esterino Adami draws a comparison between *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *Anita and Me*, arguing that the former is the 'exploration of contemporary hybridity and re-imagined England' while the latter deals with 'the notion of assimilation and mimicry, inscribed into the project of becoming, more than of being'.¹²³ Additionally, with a similar interest in the issue of cultural identity, Rabinder Power employs Stuart Hall's concept of the 'fantasmatic field' to analyse how Meena's self is constructed, and considers Anita and her white friends as 'a microcosm of the dominant culture whose power is dependent on the exclusion of the "other"'.¹²⁴

Though certainly yielding some illuminating analyses, the race-oriented reading framework that has become the established way of seeing *Anita and Me* limits the way

¹²⁰ For examples, Berthold Schoene-Harwood, 'Beyond (T) race'; Roger Bromley, *Narratives for a new belonging: Diasporic cultural fictions*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Mark Stein, *Black British Literature*.

¹²¹ For examples, Graeme Dunphy, 'Meena's Mockingbird: from Harper Lee to Meera Syal', *Neophilologus*, 88.4 (2004), 637-59; Esterino Adami, *Rushdie, Kureishi, Syal: Essays in Diaspora* (New Delhi: Prestige, 2006); Rabinder Powar, 'Crossing the Turbulent Oceans and Discovering New Shores: A Study of Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*', in *Contemporary Diasporic Literature: Writing History, Culture, Self*, ed. by Manjit Inder Singh (Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007), pp. 161-68; Fewzia Bedjaoui, 'The Pangs of the Diasporic: A Study of Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*', *The IUP Journal of English Studies*, 5.4 (2010), 7-14; Anjali Tripathy, 'Towards Hybridity: Bildung of a Diasporic in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*', *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 2.2 (2014), 137-39; Maneet Kaur, 'Reading Cultural Hybridity in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*'.

¹²² Schoene-Harwood, p. 167.

¹²³ Adami, p. 151.

¹²⁴ Powar, p. 165.

the novel is read. There are very few instances of feminist readings of *Anita*¹²⁵, and almost none that focus on the issue of class which is very pronounced throughout the novel. Although the class position of most of the Tollington residents is not unacknowledged by the critics, it is usually subordinated to their racial identity when the conflict between Meena and other villagers is examined. Contrasting Anita with Meena who struggles to find her identity, Schoene-Harwood regards Anita as ‘free’ from such burdens:

Anita—due to her whiteness and despite her gender and underprivileged working-class background— appears (at least initially) relatively unencumbered, even free, or in Dyer's words, ‘without properties, unmarked, universal, just human’.¹²⁶

Similarly, as seen from Stein's discussion above on the transformative function of the novel as a Black British *Bildungsroman*, Meena is considered to be able to empower herself through the exertion of her cultural power that reverses the othering process of the white majority, represented by Sam. In this analysis, race, not class, is the battlefield in which the two characters are fighting. In Procter's discussion of *Anita and Me*'s locality, he considers the book as a working-class novel; nonetheless, he does not distinguish between Anita and Meena's class positions. Contrasting Meena's preference for ‘her provincial childhood memories of growing up in and around a miner's tithe cottage’ with her parents' preoccupation with migrant history, Procter seems to suggest that Meena identifies more with the working-class background than with her ethnic identity, and that the conflict which drives her out of the village is rooted purely in racial prejudice.¹²⁷ Remarkably, while most critics are probably aware of the intersectionality of different kinds of social inequality, the reading of class conflicts in postcolonial writings sometimes appears incompatible with postcolonial readings. This emphasis on one aspect of political engagement at the expense of another could derive from the reductiveness of literary categorisation in academia. Literature that is categorised in terms of race and ethnicity tends to be read in relation to racial issues and within the same analytical framework as existing postcolonial writings.

Interestingly, the readings of *Anita and Me* in terms of its articulation of class inequality come from the periphery of postcolonial literary academia. John Kirk, whose specialisation is on the representations of the British working class in cultural production, considers the book as a working-class novel narrated by an Indian girl. Yet, unlike

¹²⁵ Julia Tofantšuk, ‘Construction of Identity in the Fiction of Contemporary British Women Writers (Jeanette Winterson, Meera Syal, and Eva Figs)’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Tallinna Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2007). It should be noted that this work is also from outside the centre.

¹²⁶ Schoene-Harwood, p. 164.

¹²⁷ Procter, *Dwelling Places*, p. 143.

Procter, he argues that the representations of the working-class characters, as filtered by Meena, ‘range from patronizing to the pathological’.¹²⁸ Focusing on the way in which the working class is represented, Kirk sees Meena’s description of her social environment differently from most postcolonial criticism of the book. Nonetheless, this reading exists outside of postcolonial scholarship and is likely to be overlooked by critics of the novel. Another work that explores at length the tension between class and race in *Anita and Me* is a masters dissertation from the University of Tasmania. In the first chapter of ‘Being and Longing in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*’, Sophie Alexander elaborately contextualises the plight of the Tollington villagers while taking into account Meena’s family middle-class position.¹²⁹ Her intersectional reading, however, due to its nature as a student exercise and its geographical distance from the English literary metropolises, would not usually be regarded as proper academic work unless it gets published by a certain press with a credible peer review. The two cases, on one hand, point to a blind spot of the postcolonial literary studies as an academic category; it could easily fail to accommodate relevant scholarly works outside its institutional framework of analysis. On the other hand, the existence of class-focused readings of *Anita and Me* at the periphery of postcolonial metropolitan academia coincides with my assumption about the potential of the peripheral perspectives. Although Kirk and Alexander are certainly not representative of all peripheral readers, they do show that a view from the outside could yield a reading that engages with the subject that postcolonial critics at the centre of the discipline might overlook or inadequately address.

Using this overview of scholarly responses to *Anita and Me* as my point of departure, I would like to enquire further the extent to which the novel itself yields a racialised reading which might resonate differently with different demographics of readership. The textual analysis in the next section will look at the process in which the narrative interpellates its imagined readers to identify with Meena’s journey towards maturity, which can be empowering for British South Asian readers and generate empathy from white middle-class readers. At the same time, the focalisation of the story from Meena’s point of view creates a standard of judgment that puts her white working-class friends into an antagonistic position to the reader. From the perspective of the ‘winner’ in the struggle against racial oppression, another vector of social inequality in terms of class and economic status could easily be marginalised. After examining the tension

¹²⁸ John Kirk, *The British Working Class in the Twentieth Century: Film, Literature and Television* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p. 182.

¹²⁹ Sophie Alexander, ‘Being and Longing in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*’ (unpublished master dissertation, University of Tasmania, 2010).

between class and racial positions expressed through conflicts between Meena and her friends, I will further illustrate how the novel can be alternatively read as an articulation of inequality beyond race. My contention is that *Anita and Me* has the potential to transcend its locality within Britain and engages international readers, especially those at the periphery of the capitalist world-system. Yet, in order to do so, the experiences of the local peripheries, the working-class Britons, need to be put into perspective.

Meena's Journey 'out of Tollington and into visibility'

At the heart of *Anita and Me* is the protagonist's growth from a child desperate to be accepted by the society outside her house to a more mature girl satisfied with herself and the space she occupies in the UK. There are two interrelated paths to Meena's maturity: one is her transformation from a habitual liar to a confident storyteller, while the other takes her from the small world of Tollington to a bigger, wider world outside. The former path can be considered as an emotional journey, as Meena learns the history of her parents, hears stories from her grandmother, and finally realises that she has no need to lie in order to feel a sense of belonging. The latter one is a physical journey, driven chiefly by Meena's friends' racist attitudes, which triggers her determination to find a better place in the world through education. The story narrated by Meena as a member of an ethnic minority group confronted with racial prejudice on a daily basis presumably appeals to readers coming from a similar background as her who rarely see themselves in the mainstream media. Nonetheless, as a young, second-generation British Asian, Meena has neither experience of India nor direct contact with people living there; consequently, she also shares with readers from other cultures the lack of knowledge about the history of her family, making it possible for them to identify with her as well. Therefore, it can be said that this child narrator is capable of offering both an inspiration to a particular group of minority readers as well as an alternative social history to the general public.

Although Meena is only nine years old, she is not an innocent, naive girl. She is clever, and invents lies routinely in order to achieve what she wants. Notably, Meena's 'bad habit' of lying serves an important narrative function, reminding the readers of her unreliability as a narrator as well as the fictionality of the novel itself. This metafictional aspect of *Anita* is straightforwardly announced in the prologue, where Meena recounts the story of her parents. She first talks about her 'bewildered parents in their dusty Indian village garb' and their struggles to settle in Britain as a poor and ignorant couple. Then, she confesses that what she has said in the previous paragraphs is 'the alternative history I trot out in job interview situations or, once or twice, to impress middle-class white boys

who come sniffing round'.¹³⁰ This twist undermines the expectation of readers who are familiar with existing narratives about the immigrants in Britain prevalent in the mainstream media. In other words, it warns the readers against being 'tourists' who heedlessly consume what is presented by the so-called 'insider' of a particular community. However, at this point, Meena can only make her readers aware of their possible ignorance or misperception, but she does not have any satisfactory alternative stories about herself and her family to tell. Her action, thus, also reveals the power of touristic narratives about 'others' that not only dominate the way the majority imagine the minority, but also become the material conditions under which a member of an ethnic minority group has to live when associating with members of the majority group. Even a child acknowledges that she needs to reproduce the existing narratives about, for example, her family's backwardness and exoticity, in order to feel a sense of belonging in the wider society. As Meena tells the reader at the end of the prologue, 'I'm really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong' (p. 10). Her discovery of alternative stories as she grows, therefore, is crucial to her as much as, if not more than, to the readers she seems to warn against racial prejudice. While the readers learn to become more than cultural 'tourists', Meena learns to create a sense of belonging through storytelling.

Meena accidentally makes this discovery when she eavesdrops on the conversations of her 'Aunties' and 'Uncles' one night in her own house. They recall their traumatic memories during the 1947 Partition, reliving its cruelty and mourning the loss of their loved ones. They make Meena realise that 'the past was not a mere sentimental journey for my parents, like the song told its English listeners' (p. 75). Until now, Meena knew as much about the past of her parents and other first-generation immigrants as the imagined 'English listeners' do. As she once again exposes the inauthenticity of the popular narratives that the majority are told and the power of mainstream cultural production over the way South Asians comprehend themselves, she also allows the readers to identify with her from the point of view of the uninitiated. Not only that she is initially ignorant about the unofficial, oral history, but she also lacks the cultural and linguistic competence required in order to understand her parents' jokes and secrets. When they talk in Punjabi, Meena feels left out and alienated; she can only guess what is going on by putting together certain English words she hears, just like the readers who have English as an only medium to access Meena's world.

¹³⁰ Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* (London: Flamingo, 1996), p. 9. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

While stories from the first-generation immigrants come as fragments that ignite Meena's curiosity to know more, the stories from Nanima, her maternal grandmother, which are told in Punjabi and translated to English by Meena's father, give her a more complete picture. They provide context for her parents' experiences as they turn out to be 'simply two more incidents in a country that seemed full to bursting with excitement, drama and passion, history in the making' (p. 211). This new perspective on Meena's country of origin gives her a sense of pride and immunises her against feelings of inferiority when studying India in school. She can see people like her parents as major characters, not just a backdrop for the British soldiers, and thus does not have to 'invent herself' to get rid of 'shame' (p. 211). What is striking about Nanima's stories is that they usually have another set of narratives produced in Britain, such as television adverts, as starting points. For examples, in response to the 'go to work on an egg' ad which encourages the audience to have an egg to start a working day, she tells a story about British soldiers taking away Indians' chickens and claiming they need eggs for breakfast. Nanima's act of relating Meena's world in Britain to her world that exists in a different space and time makes it easier for Meena to make sense of the stories and accept them as part of herself. At the same time, they can be seen as counter-narratives that complicate the way Meena thinks about the relationship between her ancestors' homeland and the society that she currently lives in.

The fact that Meena is empowered by Nanima's stories further suggests that the existence of alternative stories is crucial for a person to invent herself creatively and find her position within her social environment. Instead of relying on or complying with the narratives that have already been told by others in order to feel a sense of belonging, she needs to be aware of the possibility of new narratives that she could create, modify, and identify with without losing self-respect. Notably, the novel itself has a similar function as Nanima's stories. As discussed earlier, it offers a story that the underrepresented people like the young Syal could see themselves in. This aspect of the book could be compared to *The Buddha of Suburbia* as discussed in the last chapter. Even though Karim appears to represent a different kind of maturity, both books have a pivotal role in the development of the sense of self, regardless of the contested meanings of the word, among the young South Asian minorities of the 1990s.

Equally important is the issue of language and translation. Since initially Meena does not know Punjabi, she has to rely on her father to translate Nanima's stories for her. The activity of telling stories thus serves to link the three generations together. At the same time, it suggests Meena's alienation from her parental roots, here presented in the

form of collective histories, due to the language boundary. However, Meena does not seem to consider this situation to be problematic. As she wonders ‘whether papa was having a joke at my expense and embroidering the translation when he got bored’ (p. 210), she enjoys the stories nonetheless and feels privileged rather than disinherited. The significance of the stories, therefore, is less about their accuracy or authenticity than about their potential to create a sense of confidence for a child living in a place where she does not feel she belongs. Additionally, Meena later manages to create her own voice by combining stories she hears from the elders with her own experiences as a child in the UK. After learning a little bit of Punjabi, she is able to understand Nanima to a certain extent, and thus can ‘translate’ bits of Nanima’s tale into English for the readers. Starting with ‘my village was very modern, top class roads, electricity, fresh water, BBC on the radio’ (p. 230), Meena clearly declares her own intervention in the story. With her new linguistic ability, she becomes a cultural translator who does not claim the authenticity of the ‘insider’ but demonstrates her capability to blend her lived experiences with other narratives. It can be said that Meena’s account of her grandmother’s tale here marks the point where she transforms into a storyteller, not a liar anymore. She tells stories not to deceive people into accepting her as a part of their society, but to make sense of the two separate worlds where she belongs.

Arguably, Meena’s journey to maturity interpellates different demographics of readers in different ways. At the beginning of the novel, the implied readers are directed to identify with Meena’s lack of knowledge about her family’s history. Near the end of the novel, readers with a South Asian background could relate to Meena’s pride in her origins while those who do not have similar social circumstances, such as white middle-class readers, might experience a certain distance from such a feeling. Nevertheless, this latter group could have empathy towards the character that they have identified with as an individual child and learn to recognise the importance of alternative voices and histories both for the members of the ethnic minority group and for society in general. More importantly, following Meena’s growth as a storyteller, these readers are made aware of the impossibility of gaining ‘accurate’ knowledge about ‘others’, even from the testimony of the ‘insiders’. Meena does not have an insight into Indian history and culture even if she wanted to. All she has is the point of view of a girl who grows up in a middle-class immigrant family from the subcontinent that is not representative of South Asian experience as a whole. Such a point of view, moreover, is full of bias, and is already ‘contaminated’ by the experiences and memories of the narrator who is no less ‘British’ than the novel’s local readers.

However, along with this spiritual journey, Meena also gradually realises the impact of racism at a personal level through her confrontation with her white racist friends. At first glance, this stronger political gesture appears to set *Anita and Me* in an antagonistic position to the white audience who might identify with the white characters and feel offended by this criticism. Nevertheless, the treatment of the white working-class teenagers and the novel's denouement where Meena finally leaves Tollington further complicate the issue of readership of this text. According to Procter and Benwell's studies of postcolonial reading groups, people express certain feelings, such as empathy for immigrants, to construct their identity as 'anti-racist'.¹³¹ They also tend to blame others for some forms of racism that they can safely dissociate from. Thus, while the white majority readers could be said to be 'educated' together with Meena and at the same time alienated from her as members of a different ethnic group, those who belong to the middle class could find themselves in a comfortable reading position; they can detach themselves from the working-class people of Tollington by distancing themselves from their racism. Meena's 'enemies' are also 'the others' of this demographic of readers who presumably dominate the literary market, and whose sense of superiority would not be threatened by the portrayal of racial discrimination which implies that the white working class tends to be racist. This might partly explain why *Anita* is warmly welcomed by the mainstream media and considered suitable for children. The novel's pedagogical merits apparently lie in not only its celebration of cultural difference but also its compatibility with the identity of the middle-class as anti-racist, which is desirable in the age of multiculturalism.

To explore further the relationship between *Anita and Me* and its implied readership, in the next section I look at the class tension expressed through Meena's rationalisation of her superiority over the white racists. I argue that, although the novel appears to undermine the hierarchical power structure between the majority and minority, by doing so it reproduces the middle class's class prejudice and value of self-betterment which can be seen as dominant discourses in a capitalist society. Through this *Bildungsroman* narrative that has the protagonist's growth at its centre, the readers are interpellated not only to identify with Meena as a child and a racialised subject, but also to comprehend her success through a liberal capitalist perspective. As a result, the predicament of the people of Tollington as peripheral citizens of Britain exploited by the centre is obscured. Compared to Meena, their failure seems to stem from their own

¹³¹ James Procter and Betham Benwell. *Reading Across Worlds*, p. 207.

inability to improve themselves. This leads to a further analysis of the novel in relation to the working-class readers who also reportedly are included in Syal's fan base.

Meena's class (un)consciousness

Just because the English can't speak English themselves, does not mean you have to talk like an urchin. You take the best from their culture, not the worst. You'll be swearing and urinating in telephone boxes next, like that Lowbridge boy...' (p. 53)

Even though Meena and Anita are of different skin colours, they share the desire to be accepted. Meena tries to be a 'bad' girl, as opposed to the stereotype of the good Indian girl represented by her cousins, in order to impress Anita. After they become friends, they set up a 'gang' of small and harmless children, who obviously cannot get into any other 'real' gangs in the village. As Meena explains it, their mischievous behaviour is a pure performance that needs an audience. In other words, they simply want to be recognised as somebody: 'we both agreed there was no point putting so much energy into posturing and looking mean if you didn't have some others around to applaud or take the blame when things turned nasty' (p. 136). Their relationship is complicated by Sam Lowbridge, the leader of another gang called 'Tollington Rebels' who has an ambiguous attraction to Meena. While introducing the issues of sexuality and sexism in the community to the story, Sam, who finally becomes a skinhead, epitomises how racism manifests itself in active violence, which is rooted not in a sense of superiority but in self-contempt.

From Meena's point of view, racial prejudice is the key reason for the end of the friendship between the three characters. There are two shocking moments of realisation that lead to Meena's emotional and, finally, physical separation from her friends and her community. The first one is when Sam unexpectedly protests against Uncle Alan's campaign for international charities, and announces that the villagers should keep the money for themselves. Meena feels for the first time the division between people like herself and her father and people of Tollington, including Anita:

'Yow don't do nothing but talk, "Uncle". And give everything away to some darkies we've never met. We don't give a toss for anybody else. This is our patch. Not some wogs' handout.'

I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. My legs felt watery and a hot panic softened my insides to mush. It was as if the whole crowd had turned into one huge eyeball which swivelled slowly between me and papa. I wished I had

stood next to papa; I could feel Anita shifting beside me, I knew she would not hold me or take my hand. (p. 193)

In another occasion, Meena overhears Anita's conversation with another girl. She talks merrily about how she enjoys watching the boys abusing a Pakistani banker:

And we went Paki bashing, it was bosting! This Paki was standing at a bus stop, he was in a suit, it was dead funny! Nah, I only watched, the lads like did it, you know, and us wenches, we just shouted and held their lager...They really did him over and you know what, the stupid bastard didn't do nothing back! He didn't even try, he just sort of took it. (p. 277)

Here bullying the banker is taken as pure entertainment. It could be drawn from this case that the young white Tollingtons believe that a member of an ethnic minority is their appropriate victim. Both incidents above could explain why Meena cannot feel a sense of belonging even though she has said herself that her family is well respected by the majority of the community. In this society, black people, whom Meena associates herself with on the basis of their mutual 'otherness', are always considered an object of abuse or ridicule. Although Anita and Sam appear to distinguish between Meena and the other 'darkies', it seems impossible for her to separate individual from collective identity when it comes to the issue of racial discrimination. Although they are 'friends', Meena realises that Anita and Sam belong to a different social category from her. As she ponders, 'Anita and I had never been meant for each other: Sam and Anita, Anita and Sam, it sounded as natural as breathing' (p. 281). The precedence of political identity over personal relationships could be understood in the wider context of the black British politics discussed in the last chapter. It should be noted here that the sense of connection between those deemed racially inferior as presented in the novel extends beyond geographical location. Between 'some darkies we've never met' and her childhood friends, Meena finds herself relating more to the former. This 'local' incident is thus 'global' in its political implication, and opens the possibility for the global readers to identify with the text.

However, the portrayal of Anita and Sam's racism from Meena's point of view has class and gender implications. For example, in the passage above, while the boys are bashing the 'Paki', Anita and 'us wenches' are watching and cheering. Having sex with Sam afterwards, Anita appears to take for granted her role as a supporter, just as she takes the 'stupid bastard' as their natural victim. The parallel between sexist and racist attitudes that seem to be accepted as a norm reflects the kind of society that children of Tollington grow up in according to the narration. Unlike Meena whose parents are both professionals

and always take great care of their child, other children do not have ‘proper’ role models to follow and have to deal with their social reality on their own. In addition, it is worth noting that the injured man whom Meena refers to as the ‘Bank Manager’ is also a professional, indicating a more privileged social status than the abusers. The attack could be read as an expression of class tension (‘he was in a suit’) as much as an extreme form of racial discrimination. Yet, from Meena’s point of view, the bank manager is abused because he is a ‘Paki’. Arguably, this depiction of people of Meena’s skin colour as morally and socially superior to the majority of Tollington suggests the narrator’s class (un)consciousness. Through such a viewpoint, the readers are encouraged to adopt a ‘classless’ and multiculturalist perspective while witnessing the ugliness of racism.

The conflation between Meena’s self-empowerment and class prejudice is highlighted in her last encounter with Sam, which can be seen as the novel’s climax:

‘But yow wos never gonna look at me, yow won’t be stayin will ya? You can move on. How come? How come I can’t?’ And then he kissed me like I thought he would, and I let him, feeling mighty and huge, knowing I had won and that every time he saw another Meena on a street corner he would remember this and feel totally powerless. (p. 314)

Sam’s frustration seems to stem from a combination between his awareness of the social condition from which he cannot escape and his inability to understand why, compared to Meena, such entrapment happens to people like him. From Meena’s point of view, this is clearly not a personal matter; she associates herself with all female British Indians who will be able to feel ‘mighty and huge’ in the face of a working-class racist skinhead since they have more opportunities in life. Apparently, Meena undermines racial, and arguably gender, hierarchies, showing how an ethnic minority girl overpowers a white boy. This is not only symbolic, since Meena actually leaves the village afterwards, confirming what Sam predicts and putting him firmly in the ‘totally powerless’ position. However, by doing so, she makes Sam’s lack of opportunities seem justifiable or even desirable because of his racial prejudice. Sam is portrayed as impotent and desperate, deserving to be in his place over which people like Meena can exercise their power. Also, while Sam’s whiteness, as well as maleness, seems to inform his sense of superiority, it turns out he is not allowed to share the prestige of being ‘white’, with the white British middle-class. As Meena’s mother tells her in the epigraph above, Sam exemplifies the ‘worst’ not the ‘best’ of English culture. He is at best a bad example that caring parents should make sure their children are not following.

Considered as a struggle against racial discrimination, Meena's ability to prove that she is 'superior' to her white friends could justifiably be seen as a triumph of a member of an ethnic minority group. However, it makes the novel fall inconveniently into the traditional *Bildungsroman* category in which the final integration into the dominant society is uncritically celebrated. As Helff briefly explains, this genre 'charts a young person's development from an inexperienced and naïve character to a more mature, socially responsible, and integrated human being'.¹³² From Franco Moretti's comparative view, such conformity to social regulations is characteristic of the English *Bildungsroman* in particular. As he describes the protagonist, which is an 'ideal' representative of the English middle class:

He is certainly not expected to establish a moral universe that already exists, eternal and unchangeable, and even less to question that universe. His most typical function lies rather in making that world recognizable for any and all readers.¹³³

In terms of emotional growth, Meena manages to transcend the need for acceptance and create her own space where she feels she belongs: 'The place in which I belonged was wherever I stood and there was nothing stopping me simply moving forward and claiming each resting place as home' (p. 303). This statement undoubtedly reminds some professional readers of Bhabha's concept of third space, and moves Meena beyond the home and host dichotomy.¹³⁴ Yet this spiritual space, which can also be understood as Meena's realisation of her own self-esteem, is made available by her material condition that actually distinguishes her from the people of Tollington. Conversely, her pride motivates her to have a higher goal than being accepted in the deprived community, that is to become part of the dominant society whose capitalist logic is apparently colour-blind.

Her family's financial status is obviously a source of Meena's comfort. Not only does it enable Nanima to be present to assist her in creating her own voice and liberating herself from her white friends' influence, it also makes her feel superior to Anita's white but poor family. As Meena compares her parents with Deirdre, Anita's mother:

Mama and Papa charmed people, they had bought a new car, they held parties, they did not ask for approval or acceptance but it came to them nevertheless.

¹³² Helff, p. 107.

¹³³ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 189-91.

¹³⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Deirdre had been seeking approval all her life in this village, her village, and I suppose she wanted to know why life was so bloody unfair. (p. 216)

This juxtaposition reflects not only the different kinds of family in which Meena and Anita are raised, but also their different social status. While Meena's parents seem to be more well off than their neighbours who are mostly factory workers, and hence are accepted in spite of their ethnicity, Deirdre is an outcast even in her own village due to her sexual behaviour and economic position. Therefore, Meena's triumph over Anita, as well as other Tollington children, cannot be seen purely in a racial aspect; there are certainly class conflicts that should not be subsumed within racial struggles. Notably, this description of Deirdre's feeling is obviously not a perspective of a child who cannot possibly know Deirdre's personal history. It looks more like a bird's-eye view of an omniscient narrator who has the whole story in her control. Also, it is strikingly similar to Sam's expression in the previous quotation: they do not understand why they are trapped in their undesirable positions. This resentment may be intensified by Meena's family's well-being, but is certainly not caused by it.

Therefore, Meena's departure from Tollington can be seen as representative of the progress of the ethnically disadvantaged but socially and economically privileged. It is only with this latter advantage that Meena could envision her social advancement despite the economically deprived environment of the village. Importantly, Meena's ambition to improve herself, which is wholeheartedly encouraged by her parents, is an essential quality of a good subject in a capitalist society. According to Alastair Bonnett, it was even considered as a characteristic of 'whiteness' in Victorian capitalism. Terming it 'hyper-whiteness' due to its excessive idealisation, Bonnett describes the 'bourgeois whiteness' developed during the Victorian period as 'a synonym for a healthy and vigorous civilisation and also, by extension, for ambitious and expansionist capitalism'.¹³⁵ Being 'white' is thus more than skin colour. This definition also explains how the white working-class were deprived of their 'whiteness' and even considered racially different from the middle and upper class in the 19th century Britain. As a result, 'most whites, at least within Britain, were unworthy of whiteness'.¹³⁶ Considered in this light, Meena's family are more qualified to be 'white' than the other Tollington residents due to their economic status and social aspiration. Their 'blackness' is thus 'lightened', especially when education and profession assist them in avoiding the same fate as people in the

¹³⁵ Alastair Bonnett, 'How the British Working Class Became White: The Symbolic (Re)formation of Racialized Capitalism', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 11.3 (1998), 316-40 (p. 321).

¹³⁶ Bonnett, p. 322.

‘Black’ Country that has always been covered by black soot since Victorian industrialisation.

In this respect, Meena’s personal progress does not really subvert a racist narrative of black inferiority and white supremacy; it simply undermines the power of the white-skinned working-class who are not economically white enough. At the same time, it conforms to another set of capitalist narratives about self-betterment. Although Meena may have created a ‘third space’ as an Indian girl in Britain, it looks like such a space is already available for the middle class. In *The British Working Class in the Twentieth Century: Film, Literature and Television*, John Kirk compares *Anita and Me* to what he calls ‘a working-class ‘escaper’ narrative’. As he argues, Meena does not escape from the class into which she was born, but from one into which her parents’ immigrant status has pitched her/them’.¹³⁷ In other words, it is their racial, not their social status, that had forced Meena’s family to live in the white working-class community from which she finally manages to escape. Furthermore, the agency of Meena’s postcolonial subjectivity is predicated upon ‘a type of classlessness’, which is arguably a capitalist discourse prevalent in post-structuralist thought during the 90s.¹³⁸ Through such a cultural lens, Meena’s identity is seen as fluid and always in the making; at the same time, her social mobility is a living proof of Britain as the ‘classless’ society, where class identity is just a myth.

As mentioned above, although Syal vividly illustrates the effect of racism upon individuals, the novel’s critique is chiefly directed towards the white working-class. As she reveals in an interview, ‘the point at which Anita’s mother leaves is where the power starts to shift’:

For the first time I think Meena thinks ‘I can help her. She can learn from me actually, this isn’t just about me wanting to be her, it’s not assuming that everything that western girls do is the best thing. Actually, there’s some stuff that we did—that we *do* a lot better than them’.¹³⁹

Remarkably, while Anita’s tragedy points to her status as a social outcast, the ‘we’ and ‘them’ here refer to racial division between brown people like Meena and white people like Anita. This conflation between race and class stratification makes the novel appear to be a criticism of the white majority in general, even though Meena’s opponents belong more specifically to the working class. Consequently, as I suggested earlier,

¹³⁷ Kirk, p. 182.

¹³⁸ Kirk, p. 183.

¹³⁹ Broadbent, p. 7.

while certainly inspirational for the South Asian British youth, the novel also allows the white middle-class readers to construct their identity as liberal, open-minded, and free of racial prejudice. The racist characters, the white working-class who fail to adapt to the new social reality, are far from this group of readers' circle of association, and deserve to be treated as inferior to Meena. This type of middle-class identity fits perfectly with the state multiculturalism, which has been part of the state policies in several European and North American countries since the 1980s, operating mainly through educational and legal institutions.¹⁴⁰

Notwithstanding, due to the fact that according to the author *Anita and Me* has gained a number of working-class readers, the issue of readership in relation to the book's ideological stance needs to be explored further. Kirk's discussion on the trope of escape, which has a strong resonance in working-class literature of the late 1950s and 1960s, is useful here:

Here, then, is the sense of place or space as circumscribed: places marked out in dominant culture as 'Other', and lived and experienced in a condition of alienation by those within. The intensity of the metaphor as it has been applied to working-class life [...] speaks to some considerable degree of loss or fear, but also of shame and humiliation. It legitimates one mode of existence, as it maligns another. More often than not the trope of escape emphasizes the individual (often seen as special) over the collective, or class: this being the mode of life from which it is necessary to liberate oneself.¹⁴¹

If read as an escaper, Meena could be a perfect role model for people aspiring to get out of the society they do not want to live in. What is interesting in *Anita's* use of this trope is the overlap between the racially and socially inferior. In white majority culture, people of Indian descent are 'Other', and that is why Meena initially wants to escape from this category of identity by behaving differently from her family and Indian acquaintances. At the same time, for the economically dominant class, the working class, regardless of their skin colour, are considered the 'Other'; in this respect, it is the Tollington, not the Indian, community that should be escaped from. Meena appears to gradually learn this

¹⁴⁰ Although cultural differences are said to be accepted, they are usually reduced to apolitical spectacles, such as seasonal festivals, while the dominant culture and its norm remain untouched. (See Sneja Gunew, 'Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism: Between Race and Ethnicity', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997), 22-39). This kind of multiculturalism has been criticised by postcolonial thinkers since the early 1990s; yet, within the mainstream media in the UK, it is still considered an important characteristic of Britishness that people are proud of. See examples of cultural dialogues about multiculturalism in Britain in relation to their identity at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3600791.stm>, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1990118.stm>, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/10/multiculturalism-uk-research>.

¹⁴¹ Kirk, p. 26.

latter social rule, and, by the end of the novel, becomes proud of her Indianness combined with the middle-class status that her parents enjoy, and manages to escape from Tollington instead. Therefore, as much as it inspires middle-class South Asians like Meena, the book can understandably appeal to the working class who, having middle-class aspirations, actually regard their social position as undesirable.

As discussed above, since Meena's success is dependent on her privileged social status, the postcolonial reading of the text that finds Meena's agency celebratory unavoidably corresponds to a middle-class perspective. In other words, it is a reading from a position at the economic centre, which sees the Tollington village as the place from which everyone aspiring to become 'better' should depart from. Understandably, the presentation of ethnic minorities as socially respectable, especially in terms of their secure financial status, may be seen as a political discourse against the myths of immigrants prevalent among white Europeans that have become what Kureishi calls 'a terrible fiction'. As he describes:

Too superstitious, ambitious, worthless and strange—deposited outside the firmament of the acceptable—the migrant is degraded to the status of an object about whom anything can be said and to whom anything can be done. One thing is certain about him: he will not only rob you of your wealth and social position, he will be monstrous and obscene in his pleasures.¹⁴²

Portraying British Asians as modernised, hardworking and happily integrated, the narrator of *Anita* successfully undermines this 'fiction'. No one in Meena's circle is 'worthless', in contrast with most of the young Tollington residents. Evidently, the immigrants are not robbing the white hosts of their wealth; instead, they are serving Britain's economy more efficiently than the white working-class. In the context of the recent resurgence of antagonistic feelings towards the immigrants, the dramatic adaptation of the novel, staged in 2015 (Birmingham and East London) and early 2017 (UK tour), pronounces even more clearly the superiority of the British Asians regarding their financial status. All the aunts and uncles of Meena are well-to-do. They presumably live in better areas and openly express their worry about Meena's working-class environment. This reconstruction of the hierarchical power structure based on economic status could be understood as a counter-discourse. Yet, it results in the emphasis on a person's 'usefulness' for the state, which correlates to the capitalist values that not only

¹⁴² Hanif Kureishi, 'Hanif Kureishi: The migrant has no face, status or story', *Guardian*, 30 May 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/30/hanif-kureishi-migrant-immigration-1>> [accessed 20 Jun 2017].

deny the existence of the oppressive social stratification, but also appear to justify the state's rejection of those who deemed economically 'worthless'. In other words, it creates a positive image of middle-class immigrant life while ignoring less successful economic migrants, as well as overlooking the white working-class.

However, this perspective is not the only reading that the novel offers, even though the central focus on Meena's growth makes it appear so. Meena's immature perspective allows her to be inconsistent and less authoritative. As a result, the readers could be critical of her view as well as sympathising with her. She has limited knowledge of her neighbourhood but, as a curious and observant girl, reveals about the social condition of the villagers more than she realises. Indeed, through Meena, the book also speaks from the villagers' viewpoint, that is, from the social and economic periphery. Reading the novel against the standardised postcolonial framework, I argue that *Anita* has the potential to render a reading beyond race and ideological endorsement of capitalism. By shifting to the perspective of the Tollington residents who are at the periphery of capitalist Britain, a reader might be able to apprehend the wider system of unequal relationship that affects not only those deemed racially inferior but everyone in peripheral positions, both economically and geographically.

Meena as a 'Tollington wench': the economic periphery in perspective

As a young resident of Tollington, Meena naively narrates the external influences that affect the villagers as she understands them. Though feeling alienated due to her ethnic difference, she is an 'insider' of this community, more than of the South Asian community in either Britain or India. Therefore, apart from providing a worldview of a British Asian girl, Meena also brings forward a peripheral perspective of people devoid of access to any kind of opportunities offered at the centre. She witnesses changes in her village caused by outside economic growth, observes with sympathy the lives of the women who have become factory workers, and, inadvertently, reveals that her success and failure have as much to do with the wider capitalist system as racism.

Tollington, a fictional rural community outside Wolverhampton, can be considered the outpost of the outpost regarding its distance from London the capital, and is unlikely to be exoticised by any tourist readers, as discussed above. It is introduced early in the novel, and then plays as important a role as the other major characters:

The Tollington mine had once employed the whole village; it had been feted as a small but plucky contributor to the Black Country's industrial growth, not as technically impressive as the nearby Cannock Pit, not as imposing and thrusting

as the one further afield in Wirley, but a respectably productive enterprise all the same. (pp. 13-14)

During industrialisation, the Tollington mine, which is the backbone of the village, is just one, unimportant mine among several others in the whole 'Black Country', which in turn serves Britain's economy. Meena, based on what she sees in an old newspaper and presumably hears from the elders, accounts for historical changes of the village's mine, from its heyday during the war when the Mayor of Wolverhampton came to visit, to its sudden closure in the late fifties: 'no one seemed to know why' (p. 13). As marginal contributors to the British empire, Tollington villagers have no clue about what is going on at the centre and suddenly lose their jobs altogether when the mine is closed. Therefore, even though all the action takes place in Tollington, it can be said that the absent centre of the empire is omnipotent, indiscriminately affecting all the lives at the periphery who are unable to negotiate and may even be ignorant of its power.

Additionally, Tollington confronts constant urges for change, and it seems to be beyond its members' ability to either prevent or instigate it the way they want. On one occasion, a small group of people protest against the construction of a new road that links up 'the industrial estate some twenty miles away and the motorway to Wolverhampton' (p. 142), but the authorities just wait for the oppositional voices to die down and then continue the project. Notably, if we regard the road as a signifier of development, it is intended just to cut past Tollington, not from or to it. Like the road, modernity invades the village in the form of 'levels of noise and air pollution' (p. 142), but does not include it as part of the development. In the only letter the authorities write back to the protesters, they talk about the 'Black Country Renaissance', having Birmingham as 'Britain's second city', that everyone in Tollington should want to be a part of. Nonetheless, it turns out that Tollington is actually excluded from all progress:

Once there had been rumours that the old mine would be turned into variously a supermarket, a leisure centre, a baby clinic and a builder's yard. But by now, most people had realised the old mine would remain exactly what it was, a crumbling monument to a halcyon past, and that the promised Renaissance had taken a diversion somewhere round Wolverhampton and missed us out completely. (p. 143)

The closure of the mine which changes the life of everyone in Tollington appears to be treated as a small adjustment needed for the economic growth of Britain. The villagers witness the development taking place miles away at the expense of their community without any opportunity to share the benefit. Formerly 'a respectable productive

enterprise', Tollington becomes the dregs of the country, whose members are going nowhere. Therefore, it is peripheral not only in terms of its physical distance from London, but also in terms of its economic insignificance.

At the same time that the 'better life' fails to reach Tollington, Meena also witnesses its environmental degradation, showing how rapid the change is. She recalls when she was very small, standing at the edge of a cornfield with her father and seeing 'miles and miles of unbroken green', and then contrasts that memory with today's landscape:

Now the cornfields were the only stretch of land separating us from the 'townies' we so often mocked, the day trippers, the girls in their high heels which kept sinking into the muddy edges of the pavements and the lads all swaggers and brash, jingling their loose change and scaring the birds. (p. 299)

As seen by Meena, the invasion of the 'townies', due to the Bartlett estate's expansion of its investment, is corrupting her neighbourhood. The pronoun 'we' clearly expresses her affiliation with the villagers. Instead of the green fields which remind Meena's mother of her 'home', there are new buildings whose residents have the lifestyle of the town people that appears to be intimidating for the villagers. This is a main reason why Meena's parents want to leave to provide a better environment for their children. While reminiscent of the middle-class romantic ideal about the noble, uncorrupted countryside, the portrayal of the peaceful rural invaded by the raucous life of the city could evoke nostalgic feelings among readers who have lived in similar geographical areas. Although she is ethnically different from the other villagers, in such passages Meena sees the situation from their point of view, from the periphery of Britain's economic system.

Meena also observes the gender role reversal caused by the closure of the mine. The metal casting factory that opens soon after employs only the women, not the men who formerly worked as colliers. Becoming known as 'The Ballbearings Committee', these women work 'so that their husbands can eat', according to Meena's mother (p. 20). Their role as breadwinners is not empowering since it is not achieved by choice. As Meena describes the reason why women are in demand for the factory work:

But it was not the men they wanted; they wanted women, women who would do piecework and feel grateful, women whose nimble fingers would negotiate their machines, women who, unlike their husbands, would not make demands or complain. (p. 19)

Even though this sounds too mature to be the viewpoint of a child, the voice of the narrator does show a subtle understanding of working-class women whose ‘female’ characteristics both give them a chance to work and permit exploitation by the employer. Moreover, by describing the factory workers as ‘glamorous’ and ‘shocking’ (p. 19), Meena appears to look at them not only with sympathy but also with admiration. Thus, though these Ballbearings women are sometimes subjected to Meena’s mockery, they are primarily portrayed not as objects of ridicule but as a lively, powerful, and intimidating group of women, in contrast with their helpless husbands. Furthermore, the reader can also see how structural changes caused by the economic centre affect people at the periphery at a personal level. With the new condition of living, their familial relations have been changed, and both men and women are forced to adjust themselves and their outlook on life accordingly.

Tollington is also excluded from the mainstream narratives of British history. When Meena the adult reads about the Sixties, she feels ‘as if I was reading about some far off mythical country where laughing teenagers in sharp suits and A-line dresses drove around in psychedelic Minis’ (p. 164). What Meena has experienced during the sixties is totally different. The sexual revolution, that is a celebrated feature of the Sixties (with a capital S), comes in the form of ‘Sam Lowbridge’s heavy-petting sessions on the park swings, which were always cut short by a giggling audience of five-year-olds or Mrs Keithley running out of her yard brandishing a garden hose’ (p. 164). Besides portraying the harsh environment that the children have to live in, Meena’s version of the sixties provides an alternative picture of Britain different from the frame through which the British people officially see themselves and are seen by outsiders. Concerning the levels of under-representation, the white working-class in Tollington are nevertheless in a better position than Meena’s family, since they can at least identify with the representation of whiteness that dominates the media. As Meena vividly puts it, ‘if Tollington was a footnote in the book of the Sixties, then my family and friends were the squashed flies in the spine. According to the newspaper and television, we simply did not exist’ (p. 165). However, the emphasis on the marginalisation of Tollington complicates the way the reader might think about the issue of representation. It is not just the ethnic minorities that cannot see themselves in the mainstream media, the white majority living outside the centre are also devoid of media attention, and can only fantasise themselves as part of the publicised British history. In this respect, Meena’s peripheral perspective also draws attention to the issue of literary representation. If the ethnically underrepresented have such work as *Anita and Me* that successfully penetrated Britain’s mainstream literary

market in the age of multiculturalism, another underrepresented group, the white working-class, seems to be less fortunate. Even in *Anita* where their disenfranchisement and struggles are vividly portrayed, postcolonial readings often reduce their stories to the backdrop of racial conflicts in Britain.

Meena's description of the mystery of 'the Big House' also yields a peripheral perspective. It embodies the voices of the villagers peeping curiously from outside into the centre of the power that once determined their lives. Its current residents became the new owner of the mine just before it was closed down, and, from Meena's point of view, they detached themselves completely from other villagers and all the troubles they were confronted with:

However, a few years later, someone else bought the mine: someone who never cared to mix with his neighbours or his work force but delegated all his duties to faceless officials; someone for whom the pit closure apparently had no repercussions, or at least not any that would make him want to emerge and share the grief and confusion; someone who presumably still lived there because we would occasionally see smoke curling out of the chimney. (p. 15)

Evidently, the Tollington mine is at the periphery of Wolverhampton, which is at the periphery of Britain. The ex-miners, who are most affected by the closure, are kept outside the territory of the mine owner, who is virtually absent but at the centre of all attention; consequently, they are oblivious of what is actually going on even within their own village. Meena's position within this centre(owner)/periphery(worker) relations, however, changes dramatically when she discovers the identity of the owner of the Big House. The fact that the mysterious landlord is an Indian man living with his French wife moves Meena abruptly from the periphery to the centre. She no longer needs to identify with the white Tollington residents when she has a better point of reference that reflects her own ethnic identity. Even so, unlike her parents, Meena still maintains a certain distance from the Indian man, presenting him as he is: a capitalist. She complains after her father went to meet Mr Singh, 'so that's what they had talked about, property and money. I was disappointed' (p. 326). Moreover, she reveals to the reader through the dialogue between herself and her mother that this man is indeed the cause of the village's further environmental changes:

'This whole field,' she said, gesturing to the view opposite. 'It's going to be houses soon. Mr Singh told papa.'
 'How does he know?' I asked.
 'He owns it,' mama said. 'That new building next to his house, that is the show-home office or something'. (p. 327)

We can see that, at the end of the novel, the text has created two contrasting pictures of the South Asian immigrants: one is an individual struggling against racial discrimination, another is a collective body enjoying the economic power that they share with the capitalist centre. While Meena is faced with racist friends and the sense of inferiority at school, she is surrounded by well-off South Asian people, be it her parents, the uncles and aunties, the Big House's owner, or even the 'bank manager'. The last one, in particular, is actually taking part in the destruction of the community's school even though Meena does not know what exactly he does. As a British Indian girl, Meena can feel proud of the people who share the same ethnic background as her and finally make it possible for her to move to a better place. However, since she incorporates into her worldview the points of view of both the ethnic minorities and the impoverished villagers, Meena, possibly unwittingly, leaves enough room for an ambivalent reading of the intersection of class and race. While racial prejudice has violent effects, either mentally or physically, upon the racial 'other', capitalism, that is in this context used as a tool to fight against such discrimination, is equally destructive for people deprived of economic power like the Tollington residents.

From this vantage point, a reader could understand Meena and Anita's conflict in a new light. As members of this peripheral community, the two girls testify to the effect of external economic developments upon individuals. Seen within the universe of Tollington, they appear to be its 'outsiders' in different ways. As Syal points out in an interview, while Meena comes from an ethnic minority family, Anita is from a broken family, which is seen as a 'big stigma' around the late '60s when the novel is set.¹⁴³ Their friendship, as mentioned earlier, lies in their common lack of self-esteem and recognition. Yet, Anita, as well as Sam, seems to be able to exploit her privileged status as a member of the white majority to feel superior to Meena. Thus, from a racial aspect, they occupy antagonistic positions despite their mutual alienation from the community. However, considering Tollington as part of Britain in relation to its centre, we can see the conflict between Meena and Anita in a different way. Perhaps because of the media, both girls, just like other girls in the village, have the same dream of going to London. Meena gets very jealous of Anita when she imagines the girl and her friends enjoying all the landmarks of the capital: 'Before them stretched Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, the Houses of Parliament and several theatres, all lit up, throwing coloured

¹⁴³ Broadbent, p. 6.

flashes onto their laughing faces' (p. 99). Therefore, regarding London as the centre, both Anita and Meena are in the same position, as provincial girls from a small village. Although, due to her skin colour, it looks like Anita belongs to the higher position within the hierarchical power structure, as it turns out, it is Meena who can 'move on' and, as suggested by the novel's conclusion and the author's own biography, finally be able to reach the centre. In other words, Meena manages to get outside and integrate with the dominant society, while Anita is left in the periphery that is apparently excluded from official British history.

Focusing on the relationship between the peripheries and the centre, we can see that Anita and Meena are not diametrically in antagonistic, hierarchical positions but are arguably competing in the game whose rules are established by the centre. Meena's success and Anita's failure indicate the nature of such rules. Whiteness here is not a given advantage; instead, it is the education, professions, adaptability, and, most importantly, cultural capital, all possessed by Meena's family, that allows her to avoid the same failure to secure self-improvement as other Tollington children. This situation might be seen as a microcosm of competing values during Britain's transitional moments from Fordist to post-Fordist production, from reliance on local workers to the decline of manufacturing and the demand for skilled labour. As the discussion in this chapter reveals, in this circumstance, first and second-generation immigrants in Meena's circle who are all professionals are in the more advantageous position than the white population of the former mining village. Meena's 'progress' in the *Bildungsroman*ic sense is evidence of the conditions for success as a good citizen rather than the triumph of ethnic minorities over the ethnic majority. The personal clash between Anita and Meena does not challenge the order of unequal social relations, as it appears to do from the racial perspective, but rather realises this order. The larger society outside Tollington reorients itself in the new economic context, and appears to include Meena, but not Anita, as a valuable member.

Even though Meena's subject position as presented in *Anita and Me* is highly racialised, her point of view as a British Asian girl in a working-class community does not completely preempt the reading outside a postcolonial framework. Employing a peripheral perspective of people of Tollington, I have demonstrated how the novel can be read as an articulation of structural inequality beyond race and ethnicity. Notably, being a GCSE set text suggests its semi-peripheral position in literary academia compared to postcolonial literary works that are included in the university's curricula. Probably due to its focus on a specific marginalised space in Britain which is atypical of canonical postcolonial texts, *Anita and Me* does not gain much global recognition. Nonetheless,

providing a nuanced view of the unequal relationship between the metropolitan centre and its economic peripheries, the novel invites readers from outside the UK to engage with, not as tourists, but as members of the same uneven world. In line with Raymond Williams's association of England's countryside with the metropole's colonial sites, I would argue that the novel, which illustrates the deprived condition of England's rural areas after deindustrialisation, can also envisage the predicament of other peripheral countries under the global capitalist regime.¹⁴⁴ Factory workers in China, Bangladesh, and several other countries in the Global South are feeding both their national and global economy, alienated from their production, and at risk of being replaced by machines at any time. Due to its specific local setting, the book does not offer a ready-made 'universal' theme immediately accessible by everyone in the global market; yet, I contend that its historical specificity demands attention to particular historical moments which in turn reveal the effect of capitalism 'universally' experienced by citizens of the modern world in different ways.

While *Anita and Me* explicitly locates itself within the politics of representation, Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*, which I look at in the next chapter, is informed less by political movements and more by literary theories compared to the first two chapters. Published in 2002, more than a decade after *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Kunzru's debut was better placed in the British literary market where minority writings had gained quite a solid ground. My focus, however, is on how Kunzru's dramatisation of postmodern and postcolonial theoretical concepts through the identity-less protagonist affect the way in which readers might engage with the novel, as well as revealing contested readings. In line with my attempt to make imaginable peripheral readership, I will then propose a reading of the totality of the world-system as provided by the omniscient narrator, which could potentially reconcile the gap between the global elite readers and the general engaged readers outside the centre of the metropolitan literary academia.

¹⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 279-306.

Chapter Three

Beyond personal development:

The totality of the world-system in *The Impressionist*

Unlike all three novels discussed in other chapters, Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist* (2002) is an historical novel. That means it is to some degree removed from the experiences of present-day immigrants in the UK. Since minority writings, thanks to such writers as Kureishi and Sial, had gained ground in British literary culture by the time this novel appeared, the issue of ethnic minority representation is also not a concern here. Additionally, the book is not autobiographical. Unlike Karim and Meena, who are to certain degree younger selves of Kureishi and Sial, Kunzru's protagonist is a picaresque character from the colonial era. The omniscient narrator provides rich and vivid descriptions of people and places which are far beyond the protagonist's limited scope of comprehension. Through the protagonist's journeys from India to England and finally Africa, the novel presents the effects of the British Empire on a global scale. Moving beyond the 'local' to the 'global', however, this international bestseller received moderate responses from both literary critics and reviewers. While the former simply do not pay much attention to the book, the latter mainly criticise the book for its weak characterisation of the protagonist. Amateur reviewers on *Goodreads*, an online reading community owned by *Amazon*, echo such criticism.

In this chapter, I examine how the theoretical and literary concepts that drive the novel—hybridity, performativity and intertextuality—reflects its implied reader and affects the ways the real readers, both inside and outside academia, engage with the text. The protagonist, whose name keeps changing throughout the novel and thus defies a fixed identity, has the potential to bring the book beyond identity politics and invites readers to identify with the story regardless of their social and cultural background. Yet, informed partly by some 'serious' readers' responses to the book, I argue that this postmodern concept of self could obstruct the reader's identification with the central character and thus fail to create engaging reading experiences for some readers. Despite the novel's transnational outlook, its characterisation and literary references require that its readers have a particular body of knowledge exclusively possessed by professional or elite readers. Borrowing from Rebecca Walkowitz who uses the term 'born-translated' to refer to work that has 'translation' as part of its production process, I call *The Impressionist* 'born-theorised' to highlight the emphasis on theoretical concepts in its narrative

formation.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, the target readers of the book are arguably concentrated at the core of the Anglophone literary world. Peripheral readers, which include the Anglophone lay readers and those at the peripheral sites of reception, may not think the book is for them, even if it deals with such historical and social issues as colonisation and global capitalism that are actually relevant to them. A more inclusive approach of reading, however, is possible, if we shift the focus from the main character and the theoretical concepts attached to him to the omniscient narrator who offers an insight into the whole story in its depth and breadth. This means the reader's expectation of the *Bildungsroman* genre, which conventionally focuses on the growth of the protagonist, should first be problematised. Then, I will demonstrate how the discrepancy between the protagonist and the narrator's perspectives, which is not very common in postcolonial *Bildungsromane*, is necessary for the presentation of the totality of the British Empire's world-system. Detached from the protagonist as an individual, the reader could identify instead with the peripheral subjects of global capitalism, imagining herself as a part of the unequal system which determines the lives of all individuals within it in an intersectional way.

A result of a brief encounter in 1903 between an Indian woman, in her journey to be a bride of a Brahmin hygienic paranoid, and an English forester who dies right after the incident, Pran has grown up in a Kashmiri Pandit family as a spoilt child. After his origin has been exposed, he is thrown out of his former residence, and, in his attempt to seek food and shelter, is kidnapped and brought to the royal palace of Fatehpur. As a sex slave of an English officer, Pran, or now Rukshana, gets caught in complicated schemes as two political camps compete to establish the next successor to the throne. After everything ends up in chaos, Rukshana, known as Clive by his English master who also teaches him some English, manages to avoid the massacre in Amritsar, board the train to Bombay and become Bobby. Here he is adopted by a Scottish missionary couple, learns more English, and accidentally obtains an ID of a dead English youth who is bound to go to England and inherit his father's fortune. With his light skin and body of knowledge about 'Englishness', Bobby becomes Jonathan Bridgeman who later succeeds as an Oxford graduate. His unrequited love brings him to an anthropological trip to Africa where the novel, as well as his most recent identity as a white English man, ends.

This debut novel of Hari Kunzru, an Oxford-educated British novelist and journalist, may not be as well recognised as his later works such as *Transmission* (2004) and *Gods Without Men* (2011), but when it was first published, the book received

¹⁴⁵ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 3.

considerable attention as a novel with a very large advance, approximately £1.25 million for the UK, US and European rights.¹⁴⁶ In 2003, Kunzru was included in *Granta*'s 'Best of Young British Novelists', alongside Monica Ali and Zadie Smith. Despite some unfavourable reviews, the novel itself sold 100,000 copies in paperback within two years of publication¹⁴⁷, and by 2008, it had been translated into 17 languages.¹⁴⁸ Notably, while *The Impressionist* won such well-known literary awards as the Betty Trask¹⁴⁹ and the Somerset Maugham¹⁵⁰, it is the one that Kunzru turned down that caught media attention to the book. The now suspended John Llewellyn Rhys Prize was then sponsored by *The Mail on Sunday*, a newspaper that Kunzru considers xenophobic and a promoter of 'ignorance over tolerance'.¹⁵¹ His rejection, which includes his request that *The Mail* donate the money of his award to the Refugee Council, is considered by Mark Sorkin, who reviewed his third novel in 2008, as 'an early signal' that 'Kunzru takes his writing, and his ideas about corruption, seriously'.¹⁵²

According to the author's own testimony, it might be safe to say that *The Impressionist* is a metafictional novel, self-consciously referring to the English literary tradition in which it is also located. As 'a book about books', it responds to imperialist literature about the subcontinent that avid readers, especially those growing up in English culture, are supposed to be familiar with.¹⁵³ Starting with an epigraph from Kipling's *Kim*, the novel ends with a revision of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In addition, the protagonist's development, socially if not spiritually, also reminds some readers of *Bildungsroman* narratives, while his situations provoke associations with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Not only that, as a picaresque novel, Kunzru had in mind books like 'Tom Jones, Candide, and Nash's *The Unfortunate Traveler*' while he was writing.¹⁵⁴ Frederick Luis Aldama explicitly points out that 'the more the reader can make tangible the abstracted precursor texts, the more puzzle solving is derived', and that the reader's

¹⁴⁶ Rachel Cooke, 'I'm the bloke who got the big advance', *Guardian*, 16 May 2004 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/may/16/fiction.features3>> [accessed 10 July 2017]

¹⁴⁷ Rachel Cooke, 'I'm the bloke who got the big advance'.

¹⁴⁸ Hari Kunzru's official website, <<http://www.harikunzru.com/the-impressionist>> [accessed 10 July 2017]

¹⁴⁹ See more details about the award in chapter 2.

¹⁵⁰ The Somerset Maugham Awards are given to young writers (under 35) who are ordinarily residents in the UK. Like the Betty Trask, they are provided by The Society of Authors. *The Impressionist* won the award in 2003, after winning the Betty Trask Prize in 2002. See <http://www.societyofauthors.org/Prizes/Fiction/Somerset-Maugham> for more details.

¹⁵¹ Hari Kunzru, 'I am one of Them', *Guardian*, 22 Nov 2003 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/nov/22/immigration.pressandpublishing>> [accessed 10 July 2017]

¹⁵² Mark Sorkin, 'Man Out of Time', *The Nation*, 28 Apr 2008 <<http://www.thenation.com/article/man-out-time/>> [accessed 10 July 2017]

¹⁵³ Max Haiven, 'An Interview with Hari Kunzru', *Wasafiri*, 28.3 (2013), 18-23 (p. 19).

¹⁵⁴ Fredrick Luis Aldama, 'Hari Kunzru in conversation', *Wasafiri*, 20.45 (2005), 11-14 (p. 12).

‘memories’ of these texts enable her to make connections to ‘novels that collectively make up our social memory of world literature’.¹⁵⁵ Both Kunzru’s own references to canonical works and Aldama’s emphasis on the reader’s ability to identify them suggest that a fair amount of knowledge about English literature is required in order for a reader to enjoy the book in the way it is intended to be read.

The main character of the novel, as the author puts it himself, is ‘something of a blank slate’.¹⁵⁶ His identity changes every time he is renamed. Like an ‘impressionist’¹⁵⁷, he constantly performs the identity he is given in a particular situation, and hops to another one as soon as the situation changes. For a professional reader, it is quite obvious that this character’s life (or lives) is a dramatisation of the concept of identity as performative. He has no prior or innate self, and exists only when he performs as someone or something in order to survive. Put in the context of the story which takes place in different cities under the British Empire, this extreme form of mimicry could stimulate discussions about several postcolonial (and postmodern) literary concepts: for examples, as identified by Murat Aydemir, ‘hybridity, travesty, mimicry, or nomadism’.¹⁵⁸ While literary scholars present diverse interpretations regarding how the novel employs such concepts, they appear to have mutual agreement that the protagonist’s lack of identity is clearly intentional, and is appropriate to the postcolonial issues that the story engages with.¹⁵⁹

Indeed, the use of intertextuality and postcolonial/postmodern concepts in postcolonial novels, especially since Rushdie, is not considered exciting or original by some readers. As one reviewer concludes, ‘somewhere in among all this, Kunzru is propounding theories on race and belonging. But he is not telling us anything new’.¹⁶⁰ Maybe that is why the book is not as popular or sensational as the publisher might have expected. Additionally, the heavy reliance on theoretical concepts could affect the way the reader identifies with the protagonist as a person, since he seems to be just a tool to

¹⁵⁵ Frederick Luis Aldama, *A User’s Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 102.

¹⁵⁶ Aldama, ‘Hari Kunzru in conversation’, p. 12.

¹⁵⁷ In this context means a performer who impersonates well-known people.

¹⁵⁸ Murat Aydemir, ‘Impressions of Character: Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*’ in *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis*, ed. by Inge E. Boer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 199–217 (p. 205).

¹⁵⁹ See, for examples, Aydemir, ‘Impressions of Character’; Barbara Schaff, ‘Trying to Escape, Longing to Belong: Roots, Genes, and Performativity in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*’ in *Transcultural English Studies: Theories, Fictions, Realities*, ed. by Frank Shulze-Engler and Sissy Helff (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 281–292; and Jason D. Price, ‘Resisting Colonial Mastery: Becoming Animal, Becoming Ethical in *The Impressionist*’, *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 45.1 (2014), 1–34.

¹⁶⁰ Lisa Allardice, ‘Novel of the week: *The Impressionist*’, *New Statesman*, 8 Apr 2002 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/node/155343>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

demonstrate ideas. Susannah Meadows, who passionately hates the book, tells her reader that ‘between the amusing oases, you keep wishing you cared about the character you're spending some 383 pages with. You wonder, are all shallow, good-looking people really this boring? Will I remember him when this is over?’.¹⁶¹ Colourful as he is, Pran fails to gain empathy from this reader due to his lack of depth. Next section discusses how this identity-less character might be a site of disagreement between professional and non-professional readers regarding the quality (or readability) of the book. Revealingly, different responses to the book may not necessarily be the result of the discrepant literary and theoretical knowledge, but different sets of aesthetic values and expectation.

Contested Readings: intellectual and emotional connection

If this effect of the novel was regarded by some readers as a literary deficiency, one could also, with regard to performative concepts of identity, highlight this as the book’s most interesting and rewarding literary strategy.¹⁶²

Of course, the conceit of the book was his ability to impersonate others, therefore never truly revealing a ‘true’ self for the reader to care for, so connection to the character probably wasn't the author's intent. Still, it is something I need to make me really like a fiction book.¹⁶³

The quotations above demonstrate different viewpoints towards Pran’s lack of fixed identity between a professional reader, i.e. a literary critic, and an amateur online reviewer. In the first one, Barbara Schaff clearly acknowledges that ‘some readers’ consider Pran’s characterisation as the novel’s shortcoming; however, she insists that, equipped with certain theoretical knowledge, a reader could regard the same thing as an excellent literary technique. By implication, Schaff has two groups of readers in mind: ones with knowledge about the author’s conceptual framework, and ones without. Nonetheless, as seen in Miquela’s comment, readers who do not appreciate this ‘literary strategy’ are not necessarily ignorant of the author’s intention. Knowing about ‘performativity’ or not, Miquela is certainly aware that the distance between the reader and the protagonist is intentional; it is just that she prefers the ‘connection’ to the ‘conceit’. It could be said, therefore, that what marks the distinction between the two

¹⁶¹ Susannah Meadows, ‘Son of a Sort of Goddess’, *New York Times*, 12 May 2002 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/12/books/son-of-a-sort-of-goddess.html>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

¹⁶² Schaff, p. 290.

¹⁶³ Miquela (Cairo, Egypt), *Goodreads*, 22 May 2013 <<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/621698010>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

quotes is not as much the different degrees of knowledge as the different values one places on a literary work. The first is intellectual; the second, empathetic.

Some other amateur reviewers echo Miquela. They make explicit that they could recognise the intellectual quality of the novel, but still, it obstructs rather than encouraging them to engage with the story:

I can completely understand how a man, out of necessity and survival, having to constantly take on new personalities and identities, would find it hard to hold on to a sense of core self. I get it. But it left me unattached to Pran, unconcerned with what happened next, what happened in his future, and ultimately, it stripped the book of any emotion for me. These are the reasons I rate the book 3 stars.¹⁶⁴

For me though for some reason I wasn't moved emotionally by this novel, it felt perhaps more like a cold intellectual exercise than something which could fully engage my emotion. Not a bad read, but missing that emotional core that might have lifted it to greatness.¹⁶⁵

Both reviewers obviously regard an ability to create emotion as a criterion for a good novel. Interestingly, these different standards of judgement, one prioritising concepts and another emotional engagement, coincide with different language registers as could be illustrated in the following quotations. Since the users of *Goodreads* could be anyone, including such professional or semi-professional readers as academics, bloggers, and literature students, some positive reviews of *The Impressionist* bear out a similar reading approach to those in academic journals. These reviewers enjoy the novel's dramatisation of many literary and social concepts. Unlike Kristin and Nick who place emphasis on their personal reflections and mainly use 'I' in their posts, they voice their opinions in an impersonal, jargonistic way:

This story should be required reading for everyone who plays at identity politics. The protagonist's long, complicated journey through many put-on selves keenly dramatizes just how unstable, performative, and fragile any 'self' is.¹⁶⁶

A great 'post-colonial' work dealing with all sorts of identity, gender/sex identities, national identities, genealogical identities, identity and the body... This could go on forever. Cool to read with Deleuze and Guattari's Introduction: Rhizome.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Kristin, *Goodreads*, 18 September 2012 <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/417580493> [accessed 10 July 2017].

¹⁶⁵ Nick, *Goodreads*, 23 June 2008 <<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/25182227>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

¹⁶⁶ Brian Cowlshaw (Tahlequah, OK), *Goodreads*, 17 December 2015 <<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1471507090>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

¹⁶⁷ Sara Willis (Wilmington, NC), *Goodreads*, 16 March 2008 <<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/17852220>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

Both of the above clearly demonstrate the reviewers' rich background knowledge about theoretical works relevant to the novel. Arguably, they almost treat *The Impressionist* as an academic book, seeing it as 'required reading' and a good supplement to Deleuze and Guattari's book. In contrast with Kristin and Nick quoted earlier, they do not care if the protagonist could not engage them emotionally, since their chief focus is on the novel's rejection of the notion of the static self. They are, as another reviewer of the book puts it in her personal 'Recommended for' heading, 'those who feel no need to have a sympathetic protagonist'.¹⁶⁸

The Impressionist's intertextuality and meditation on theoretical concepts, then, reveal its implied readers, which are serious literary readers familiar with, if not actually working in, an academic environment. They could be said to belong to what Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell and Nathan Wright call 'the reading class', which consists of heavy, rather than casual, readers, who come from a very strong reading culture and/or can afford the luxury of seriously reading.¹⁶⁹ This reading position undoubtedly comes with the idea of prestige. According to Aldama, the 'ideal reader' of the book 'is one who relishes novelty,' which is 'not the same ideal reader of, say, Mary Higgins Clark'.¹⁷⁰ That is to say, the reader who will enjoy *The Impressionist* is the reader who is ready to experience something new, not confining herself to the repetitions of genre fiction. This assumption is indeed questionable, since, as James Procter points out in his review, 'mimicry is a well-worn theme in Indian and British Asian writing in English and it is easier to see how Pran's impressions potentially unsettle the world views of his contemporaries rather than those of contemporary readers'.¹⁷¹ Some seasoned postcolonial readers might think the book is 'predictable' like Procter, and thus cannot see 'novelty' in it. Also, a 'new' concept and non-traditional plot in one literary environment could be a familiar one in another. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that those who are attracted by the book are presumed to belong to a different class of readers from Clark's fans, and that they are required to be more well-equipped and active than those who simply casually and passively read.

Accordingly, though the novel's plot develops in multiple locations and potentially appeals to the global readers regardless of their places of origin, it indeed

¹⁶⁸ Lisa (Harmonybites) (New York), *Goodreads*, 23 June 2011
<<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/179223578>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

¹⁶⁹ Wendy Griswold, Terry McDonnell, and Nathan Wright, 'Reading and the Reading Class in the Twenty-First Century' *Annual Review of Sociology* (2005): 127-41.

¹⁷⁰ Aldama, *A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction*, p. 92.

¹⁷¹ James Procter, 'Reviews', *Wasafiri*, 19.41 (2004), 58-71 (p. 64).

requires the proficiency of the global elites to comprehensively appreciate it. This ‘born-theorised’ novel, which has theoretical concepts at the centre of the narrative formation, could obstruct textual engagement even by an enthusiastic reader. However, while the conceptual reading and reading for identification practiced by the two kinds of readers roughly categorised here seem to occupy opposing positions, they actually share a focus on the life of the protagonist. That means they similarly approach the text as a novel of development. I agree with these readers that *The Impressionist*’s plot structure and characterisation undermine the premise of the *Bildungsroman* narrative and the notion of static self. Yet, by doing so, it not only criticises the ideological assumptions of the genre, but also alienates the reader from the protagonist. While this could produce a lack of connection between the reader and the text, I argue that the sense of alienation could divert the reader’s focus from the main character to other characters and their circumstances. Instead of seeing the novel as a satire of the English literary genre that fails to captivate its general readers, we could look at the realist aspects of this seemingly non-realist text. According to Aydemir, the realistic mode of reading ‘must make way for a way of reading the novel that is attuned to the concepts it draws on’, and ‘the focus the book lacks when read as a realistic novel may therefore sharpen as soon as this thoroughly conceptual nature is recognized’.¹⁷² For me, however, what the reader is asked not to focus on is the protagonist as an individual. She is asked, rather, to pay attention to the ‘reality’ of the British Empire’s world-system in its totality. This alternative focus would make the meticulous details of almost 500 pages more worthwhile for the wider audience who are all experiencing the effects of imperial capitalism albeit in different degrees. In the next section, I analyse the way in which *The Impressionist* critically defies the convention of the *Bildungsroman* narrative and presents the omniscient narrator as a more reliable source of information compared to Pran. The distinguishable but intertwined viewpoints of the protagonist and the narrator draw attention to the relationship between the individual and the system in which he is in. Despite his freedom of movement and ability to adopt a new identity at will, Pran is still subjected to, and apparently ignorant of, the governing power of the system that the narrator could comprehensively describe.

¹⁷² Aydemir, p. 204.

Defying the ‘enabling fiction’

Spavin is an admirer of Dickens, and Jonathan Bridgeman’s appearance accords perfectly with the old boy’s template for such a person. A little old, perhaps. And male. It would certainly be more piquant if he were a she. Being already that most Dickensian of things, a lawyer, Mr Spavin is now about to become Bridgeman’s guardian. A moment like this, when life takes on the formal quality of literary art, is to be savoured. Spavin shakes his head in silent wonder at the depth of his own sensibility.¹⁷³

Having a young boy going on a journey as its central character, *The Impressionist* could be loosely categorised as a *Bildungsroman*, as I have already stated. Like other migrants, Pran travels from his peripheral homeland to the centre of the empire; but unlike them, with his fair skin and a fake document, he is welcomed as part of the ‘self’, even the privileged one. The book is clearly self-conscious about its own narrative formation. In the above quotation, Spavin, the Bridgeman family’s solicitor who becomes Pran’s guardian, appears to imagine Pran as a protagonist in a Dickensian novel and himself as a supporter. This not only foreshadows Pran’s rise from a humble social position to a relatively privileged one as typical of the genre, but also implicates that his life as Bridgeman is indeed shaped by others, be it the person in a more powerful position or the books that precede his existence. Governed by the developmental plot structure, he is not ‘free’ even when he is assimilated into the English society as a white well-educated young man.

However, apart from that brief period in England as Bridgeman, Pran does not end up becoming a good member of any particular society. Unlike Dickensian protagonists, he has learnt from his adventures to be no one at all, and his changes have almost nothing to do with development. Therefore, we could say that his success in education at Oxford is set up simply to be undermined, not celebrated as the terminal of his lifelong journey. As discussed in other chapters, this anti-*Bildungsroman* plot is typical of writings about and/or by gender and racial marginalised groups. In this respect, *The Impressionist* can be compared to Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, whose protagonist undergoes no significant change in either personality or belief throughout the novel. Though both of them lack ‘proper’ development, the difference between Pran and Karim is quite remarkable. While Karim clearly defines himself as a hybrid subject and maintains his ambiguous status throughout, Pran keeps changing, literally becoming a different person at a different time, until the end. In other words, Karim has a fixed

¹⁷³ Hari Kunzru, *The Impressionist*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2002), pp. 294-95. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

identity, constructed by the society and performed by himself, but Pran has none, except what he chooses to employ at a particular moment in order to survive. Kureishi's main critique of the novel of development is, then, its endorsement of the social norm that allows only a particular group of people to be socially incorporated. Kunzru, by contrast, is asking if anyone has a real self to be developed at all. As Peter Morey argues, *The Impressionist* suggests that, apart from 'typification', 'in our postmodern, hyper-mediated world there may be nothing else to see'.¹⁷⁴

As a result, modelled on a postcolonial mimic man, Kunzru's anti-*Bildungsroman* hero also registers the postmodern idea of selfhood that goes beyond the politics of identity. While presenting the effect of colonialism upon individuals, the book questions the very essence of being an individual itself in such 'enabling fiction' as the *Bildungsroman*, which is predicated upon the progressivist narrative of self-development. As Joseph Slaughter argues, the traditional *Bildungsroman* has a double subject: 'it imagines a relational individualism, a harmonious concordance of the person's universalist inclinations and the interpellative force of social relations, of which the person is a part and an effect'.¹⁷⁵ In order to become an individual, a person cannot just 'be' herself, but has to reconcile with the rules of a particular society, accepting them as normative, so as to be recognised as its member. Operating in tandem with human rights discourse, Slaughter claims, the *Bildungsroman* narrative puts forward a model of 'free and full human personality development' which, consequentially yields an ideal and 'universal' citizen-subject. Even postcolonial *Bildungsromane*, which purposefully criticise the exclusivity of the idealist *Bildungsroman* that is preserved for the white male bourgeoisie, abide by the same notion of human rights, yearning to belong to 'the egalitarian imaginary' of the nation-state that they appear to be excluded from.¹⁷⁶

The ideological function of the *Bildungsroman* as an internationally popular genre could have strong resonance upon international reading communities. Although the real world is unmistakably unequal, the fictional world of self-development allows the reader to imagine their rights and possibility to become equally and fully developed. In this respect, *The Impressionist* undermines its implied reader's expectations in two dimensions. First, as a colonial subject, Pran too easily conforms to the hegemonic power as if he did not have his own free will. Second, even when he is successful as a qualified

¹⁷⁴ Peter Morey, 'Performing Identity Intertextuality, Race and Difference in the South Asian Novel in English' in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, ed. by Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 82-97 (p. 91).

¹⁷⁵ Joseph R. Slaughter, 'Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The *Bildungsroman* and International Human Rights Law', *PMLA* 121.5 (2006), 1405-23 (p. 1410).

¹⁷⁶ Slaughter, p. 1410.

citizen, he nonetheless does not become 'full and free' as an individual. Reading Pran's effort to become a white gentleman, we can see that the development of the previously marginalised is less the assertion of their own individuality than the self-modification for assimilation, which paradoxically results in the loss of self. While Karim's self in *The Buddha of Suburbia* is not fully constructed in his way towards maturity, Pran completes this process with the disappearance of his identity.

Despite his globetrotting experiences, the only lessons Pran actually learns during his journey and internalises as part of himself are about English language and culture. At first, Pran needs to know the language in order to sustain himself, and he is lucky enough to be taught by a native speaker; then, he learns to gain additional benefits from it as an errand boy and an Oxford scholar. After moving to England by the name of Jonathan Bridgeman, he studies 'Englishness' in order to consolidate his status as a white man. Preparing for university in a prestigious sixth-form college, he takes notes on everything about the English that he observes, as 'Englishness seeps a little deeper into his skin' (p. 307). From the description of his notes, it is as if he was carrying out his own (post)colonial exploration:

Jonathan notes all this down: *nobility of discipline, respect for religion important but belief optional, check your plate first*. His notes spread out into all areas of school life, from the rules of rugby football to the construction of a jam sandwich. Week by week his understanding of this world improves, the white spaces on his map filling up with trails and landmarks. (p. 315)

Drawing his personal map, Pran constructs a world in which he tries to belong. The reader is exposed to English society through an outsider's perspective, which could be seen as reverse exoticism. However, in contrast to the colonisers who want to understand the native lands to conquer and control, Pran learns about the English world in order to shape himself to fit in. His success at first as an Oxford scholar is a critique of how people are classified by their skin colour and manner, while the colonisers are preaching the inherent differences between races. At the same time, his change demonstrates what the idea of personal 'development' really is in the socially and racially segregated society. As mentioned, it is a modification, a studious practice to discipline oneself according to the dominant norm. In Spavin's sense, Pran's self-betterment certainly promises a happy ending of his imaginary plot. Ironically, as it turns out, his new subject position costs Pran a girlfriend who appears to have a fetish for exotic men. Due to his repetitive performances, he cannot even claim his initial identity as his selling point in this romantic transaction. Once all traces of Englishness are eliminated by the African sorcerer at the

end of the novel, Pran becomes no one in the heart of nowhere, returning to the original stage of void. Thus, Pran's story of 'development', instead of reaffirming or demanding equal rights of all human beings to develop themselves, points to the fact that there is no recognisable individuality outside the modern bourgeois society, which will accommodate only those who learn and conform to its 'universal' rules.

It should be noted that while the reader can detachedly observe Pran's struggles and understand his situations in the wider context in the book, Pran himself is oblivious about the 'plot' of his own life, and adapts himself according to changing circumstances only to survive. The one who sees the whole network of relations that make up the world under the rule of the British Empire is the narrator. Presenting himself in contrast to Pran, he appears to be an insightful, sympathetic observer of every character and action. As a result, while Pran knows almost nothing beyond the immediate situations he is confronted with, the reader is given an overall picture of the declining British Empire and the lives that are affected by it. That is to say, the reader knows the world Pran is living in more than he does. This creates some distance between the protagonist and the reader. Sometimes, different points of view of the same situation are provided, highlighting Pran's ignorance and sense of otherness. At the train station in Amritsar not long after the massacre, for example, the narrator describes how Pran sees and is seen:

As Pran walks down the street, people stop and glare at him. For almost two weeks now the sahibs have only entered the city in military patrols. Their women and children are in the Gobind Garh Fort. Why is this boy strolling about, looking at the damage like a tourist? The gleaming dome of the Golden Temple peeps over the soot-blackened roofs. Oblivious to the reaction he is causing, Pran heads towards it. (p. 181)

Pran hurries on past. A week of martial law has left a stink in Amritsar. Charred wood. Uncollected refuse. The sweetness of cremated flesh and the sharpness of burnt sari silk, powdered and used to staunch bleeding. He catches a glimpse of gold and water at the end of a street, the Temple in the middle of its huge tank. A tailor sits outside his shop, blank and impassive. A few people pass by on the narrow street. (p. 184)

In the first excerpt, the scene is narrated from the viewpoint of the Indians on the street, before the omniscient narrator takes over in the last two sentences. The second one apparently depicts the same site, through Pran's sensory perception but with the insight of the narrator who knows, possibly retrospectively, the consequence of the martial law enforced in Amritsar. It is clear that, in both quotes, Pran is presented as totally unaware of the questioning eyes of the local people. He is seen as a 'tourist' by the local onlookers, while the narrator understands them, knowing what has happened and how they would

feel about a white young boy wandering around. This way of narrating sets the protagonist and the narrator apart; the former is unreliable and probably also unlikable, while the latter is like a well-informed historian or journalist, the source of knowledge the reader needs to rely on.

It could be said, therefore, that the picaresque character, himself the deconstruction of the notion of identity, functions as a vehicle with which the reader is taken to see the narrator's world. This discrepancy between the protagonist and the narrator marks an important difference between *The Impressionist* and other well-known *Bildungsromane* that employ retrospective narration by the protagonist later in life. In these novels, as Slaughter points out:

The elder narrator acts as a guarantor, like the Society of the Tower, of the younger protagonist's enfranchisement. This narratorial agency bends teleological linear development into a reflexive structure of narrative self-sponsorship that repairs the initial diegetic split between protagonist (man) and narrator (citizen).¹⁷⁷

Speaking from the position of incorporation, the protagonist-narrator proves to the reader the possibility of becoming part of the society as a citizen in the name of a free individual.¹⁷⁸ Many postcolonial *Bildungsromane*, even though attempting to criticise the traditional *Bildungsromane* for their Eurocentric, bourgeois and patriarchal assumptions, have their protagonist read these classical counterparts, and hence legitimise the genre as an international form of emancipatory narrative.¹⁷⁹ *The Impressionist*, in contrast, clearly distinguishes between the protagonist and the narrator, announcing at the outset that Pran will not become an all-knowing narrator; the 'man' will not be the 'citizen'. The retrospective voice of the narrator does not promise any possibility of development or enfranchisement; instead, it exposes the unsympathetic world in which the individuals endlessly struggle in varying degree depending on their contingent social positions.

The discrepancy between Pran and the narrative voice of *The Impressionist* also has a strong effect on how the reader engages with the novel. While Pran learns from his personal experiences and improvises a suitable response for each situation, the omniscient narrator provides the audience with a great deal of historical background, detailed descriptions of several settings, and even psychological conditions of minor characters that Pran encounters in his journey. In addition to the history of Pran even before he is

¹⁷⁷ Slaughter, p. 1415.

¹⁷⁸ See the discussion of *Anita and Me's Bildungsroman* plot in chapter 2 for an illustration.

¹⁷⁹ Slaughter, p. 1418.

born, the reader gains an insight into Captain Privett-Clampe, the colonial officer who hates administrative work; Reverend Macfarlane, the missionary who ceaselessly struggles against his own desire; and even his wife, whose despair leads her to 'unorthodox' belief. As a result, the reader could sympathise with many characters, possibly even more than with Pran, even though he is the central character and seems to be the main focus of the overall narrative. On one hand, this omniscient point of view could mar the reader's identification with the protagonist and his fate; on the other hand, it potentially shifts the reader's focus from Pran to the world, to which all the characters, relating directly to each other or not, belong. In other words, the narrative structure of *The Impressionist* alienates the reader from the disenfranchised protagonist who is going nowhere in term of personality development, and draws her attention to the fictional world-system that could resonate with the actual one in which she lives. In this light, the reader is offered an all-knowing position from which she could see Pran as a reflection of herself, that is, a small, insignificant consciousness struggling to survive in a brutal, indifferent world.

Pran's routes: Mapping colonial experiences in the world-system

The Impressionist's geographical range marks its obvious difference from the other novels discussed in this thesis. While the main actions of the three stories take place in Britain, Pran's adventures take the reader across the British Empire. This global scope allows an examination of colonial occupations in a comparative way.¹⁸⁰ We see the decline of the empire in India, the beginning of the invasion in certain parts of Africa, as well as the attempts at the metropole to consolidate its power through the colonial exhibition. More crucially, the novel registers how colonial 'modernity' plays out in the empire, and how it affects fundamental changes in the society it creeps into. Describing the Fort of Agra, the narrator insightfully elucidates how the railway project is essentially part of the centralising process:

A railway bridge runs beside it, carrying passengers into the city from every part of India. The bustling crowd at Fort Station never thins, even in the small hours of the morning. The crowd is part of the grand project of the railway, the dream of unification its imperial designers have engineered into reality. The trails of boiler-smoke which rise over heat-hazy fields and converge on the station's packed platforms are part of a continent-wide piece of theatre. (pp. 17-18)

¹⁸⁰ With the exception of Hasina's letters from Bangladesh in *Brick Lane*.

The Fort Station is one of several centres brought about by the railway system, gathering the 'crowd' and together forming a 'theatre' which belongs to the empire. The structural relations and life-style of the people within the 'theatre' is therefore established by this newly-invented means of transportation. It generates a more organised, comprehensible and controllable society. While setting a stage for the protagonist's 'performance' in such a 'theatre', this narrative viewpoint simultaneously implicates his minor role within this all-embracing mechanism.

The portrayal of Fatehpur also reveals the competition between the 'home' and the 'empire', illustrating how the people of the two peripheral cities within their countries are linked together across the world through capitalism:

Fatehpur's only major centre of population is Fatehpur town itself. Although some distance from the trade artery of the Grand Trunk Road, which passes to the south of the principality on its way to Peshawar from distant Calcutta, Fatehpur still feels some benefit. Its weavers once made a particular type of chequered cotton cloth, popular across north India. Competition from machine-woven Manchester fabrics has damaged this, but the town is still bustling. (p. 95)

Remarkably, Fatehpur's location is made visible for the reader through its relationship with other more important economic sectors. Itself highly centralised, the city reaps some benefits from 'the trade artery' brought by the road connecting two commercial spots. The fact that its manual labours are rivalled by the more technologically advanced Manchester indicates the uneven competitions which could be more damaging for its citizens than they are aware of at the moment.¹⁸¹

Similarly, Short's Landing in West Africa becomes a local centre after it gains the status of township. People from the countryside are flowing in, 'drawn by bright lights and government pay' (p. 764). This centre of activities, moreover, is presented as a condensation of economic, technological and military powers of the empire:

A line of telegraph poles follows the course of the main road, which stretches away out of town to the north. By its side, a resting road gang watches artillery being moved along it, mules straining at their harnesses, the wheels of the limbers throwing up a cloud of red dust. (pp. 480-81)

The road clearly not only encourages economic activities, but also facilitates the transportations of military weapons which allow the rulers to strengthen their power. The

¹⁸¹ Although existing in different times and spaces, Fatehpur could be compared to the Tollington village, the setting of *Anita and Me* discussed in chapter 2. They are both peripheral sites of the British empire, feeding the centre from faraway locations and getting replaced by the more technologically or socially advanced economic agents.

passivity of local people who are employed to build the road, watching it being used by the outsiders who come to rule them, emphasises the sense of entrapment and acceptance; once they need to rely on those who possess capital, they apparently have no choice but to work for and be governed by them.

Self-consciously offering a bird's eye view of the global scenario in the early twentieth century, the narrator also links the local history of India and Indian people to global phenomena, particularly World War I and the flu pandemic in 1918. In his description of Agra, he introduces the reader not only to the place but also to a historical person whose military service in World War I connects India as a colony to the British Empire: 'If, like the flying ace Indra Lal Roy, you could break free of gravity and view the world from up above, you would see Agra as a dense, whirling movement of earth, a vortex of mud-bricks and sandstone' (p. 17). Addressing the reader directly, the narrator invites her to imagine the city from the perspective of the only Indian flying ace of the Royal Air Force, who was defending Britain against its enemies while his country of origin was occupied by the empire.¹⁸² Further, he draws a parallel between the Great War and the Spanish Flu epidemic, associating two kinds of large-scale death through the death of the pilot, an individual who, not unlike other colonial subjects, has become an insignificant part of the global history in which a small number of powerhouses play major roles:

Across the world, the scale of this killing is even greater than the slaughter that is finally playing itself out in Europe. Here, it hangs like a miasma over the knot of streets near Drummond Road, the quarter of the city called Johri Bazaar where the jewellers have their shops. Now, like the pilot Roy, trailing black smoke over faraway London, plummet down into the middle of all this death, to a large, impressive house cut off from the street noise by high brick walls. (p. 19)

The image of the aircraft, falling to the ground among the dead bodies, not only links the war to the pandemic, itself a result of the world-wide military movements, but also highlights the connection between 'here' on a street in Agra and there in 'faraway London'. Like the casualties of the war that Britain brings to its colonies, the victims of the disease are another consequence of the global circulation of people, caused by colonisation and intensified during World War I. The tragedy 'here', thus, is inseparable from the affairs 'there', and so is the local from the global. The reader, again, is offered the experience of the Indian air fighter through the use of the second person address, but

¹⁸² Manimugdha S Sharmal, 'Indians who lorded over European skies in WWI', *Times of India*, 8 October 2014 <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Indians-who-lorded-over-European-skies-in-WWI/articleshow/44717029.cms>> [accessed 10 July 2017].

unlike him who performs his duty to the British empire, she falls into the tragedy of his home country. In other words, the narrator asks the Anglophone readers to make a reverse journey from Roy's. While Roy moves to the centre, the reader is brought to the heart of the periphery where the main action of the story begins. This way of introduction blurs the boundary between the insider and outsider while foregrounding the intertwined history of Britain and its empire. It treats the reader not as an ignorant tourist, but as an active part of this history.

The narrator's point of view also presents a mixture of the retrospective semi-official account of history and the oral tradition. Describing the calamity of Agra in its totality, the narrator can casually identify the cause and foresee the aftermaths of the current incident, even giving the approximate number of casualties:

Now, as it does every so often, death has come to hang over the city. This time the killer is not siege or famine but the influenza epidemic, making its way eastwards across the world from its mystical birth in a pile of dung behind an American army camp. By the time it leaves it will have taken with it a third of Agra's people. (p. 18)

Clearly, this omniscient narrator is looking at the incident in retrospect, possibly basing his account on reports that have contributed to parts of the official history of the place.¹⁸³ Nonetheless, they are just partial resources from which the narrator acquires his knowledge about the past he is narrating. In his recounting of the curse of the Fatehpur's royal family, it is likely that the information he shares could have been transmitted only through word of mouth. The Old Nawab, despite having already spent too much money, wanted to buy a ruby and thus took out a loan from a Hindu banker 'in secret' for 'political reasons':

It was duly set into a turban jewel which the present Nawab still wears on official occasions. It is a badge of secret shame. Shame because there were other creditors, many others, and the Charan lived in far-off Mewar. Shame because the Old Nawab weighed up his obligations and defaulted on the debt, thinking there would be no real consequences. Shame because the Charan still followed the old, hard traditions of his caste, and when he realized he would not be paid he mixed a poison and committed ritual suicide. On his deathbed he grabbed his son by the collar, and, pulling him down close enough to whisper, cursed the family which had brought such shame on his own. (pp. 142-43)

¹⁸³ See 'Influenza in India, 1918', *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)*, 34.42 (1919), 2300-02 for an example of such reports.

The shame the Nawab has brought to himself and his family is a 'secret' one; however, the narrator can comprehensively explain it. On the one hand, this could point to the all-knowing power of the narrator; on the other hand, together with the earlier account of the pandemic, the shameful 'secret' implicates various ways in which stories of the past are transferred to the present. Combining written accounts with oral communication, the narrator employs different voices and viewpoints to recreate his own version of history.

This story of royal corruption also reveals the unlikely relationship between the occult, usually associated with the pre-modern, pre-capitalist mode of being, and the materialistic consumption, which are at the core of capitalism. This could be seen as an expression of the clashes between two contradictory forces typically found in a system characterized by combined and uneven development. Interestingly, in the case of Fatehpur's elites, they do not realise, or possibly do not want to accept, the fact that they are already part of this world-system, not existing autonomously in the palace built by 'Venetian mosaic-workers' using 'coloured marble from Ferrara' and 'stained glass from Oxford' (p. 77). Yasmin, one of the hijras of the current, conservative Nawab, explains to Pran what would happen if his westernised brother succeeds to the throne:

Then Firoz will make hotels and railways, and an airstrip and a cinema, and he will pass a law saying everyone must wear trousers and believe in modern industrial methods.' Yasmin sounds rather excited at the prospect, but he checks himself. 'It will be very bad,' he says solemnly, 'because Firoz loves only things which come from Europe in crates, and if he becomes Nawab he will spend his fortune on these things, and the great tradition of Fatehpur will be lost. (p. 105-6)

Comically ambivalent about industrial development, Yasmin very interestingly refers to the potential loss of 'the great tradition' as a reason to oppose the prospective 'modernity'. Although he does not specify what this tradition consists of, from his logical deduction, spending on European imports will destroy it. However, since neither constructing the palace with imported materials nor using up money with luxurious goods appear to be a problem, it could be derived that the great tradition does not exactly mean the pre-colonial stage free from foreign influences or commercial transactions; it is, probably, the concentration of such activities at the top of Fatehpur's hierarchical social structure, which is the palace itself. Thus, the conflicts between the two royal brothers cannot be easily classified within a westernised/traditional dichotomy as they initially appear to be. As an orthodox Muslim, the Nawab could arguably be seen as guarding the Islamic world against the western colonial invasion; yet, from the narrator's caricatured description of

the court, the Nawab's opposition to his brother's succession may not be as much driven by a nationalistic or religious impulse as a concern for his own position.

Evidently, the omniscient narrator, with his extensive knowledge obtained from different sources including Pran's experiences, provides the reader with a comprehensive picture of networks of power relations in which Pran as an individual has to struggle. Given this multifaceted perspective, the reader occupies a special vantage point, distant enough to see the whole scenario, and close enough to hear the voices of people within it. In this respect, Pran plays a crucial role in drawing the reader's attention to a particular moment or site of conflict, in which he becomes either a victim or a beneficiary. Moreover, since Pran wanders around the world, the reader has an advantage of comparatively observing and experiencing through his actions different situations in different places within the same world-system.

During his time as Robert/Pretty Bobby in Bombay, Pran lives two apparently opposite lives: one as an adopted child of missionaries, another as a freelance worker in the red-light district. That is to say, one is an honourable mission for the god of the Christians, another is for their Satan. However, through the character's double identity, the two are presented as simply different personas of the same colonial contact. While the 'civilising mission' is being conducted, which is sharply ironic in the case of Reverend Macfarlane and his wife who seem to be influenced by the locals rather than having any substantial impact upon them, the ships arrive at the port, bringing potential customers who are looking for a boy like Bobby. The protagonist, himself a result of colonial encounters, here renders perceptible how ideas of both virtue and sin, according to the biblical God, are imported by the colonisers, and how exposure to the world affect the lives of all colonial subjects in different but intertwining ways. Through Bobby, the reader can also see the ways in which the idealistic goal of the civilising mission and its actual by-products play out. In order to survive, Bobby, just like the owners of the brothels and the spiritual charlatan, has very little choice but to adapt himself to the demands of the market.

When Pran, or then Jonathan Bridgeman, embarks on the voyage to Africa, his subject position has dramatically changed from when he was in India. A rich Oxford graduate in an anthropological expedition, Jonathan is the invader, not the invaded; the powerful, not the powerless. Yet, rather than playing the role of the oppressor, he is caught in confusion during the rapid change brought by colonial invasion. Again, the protagonist appears to be an individual thrown into a difficult situation that is beyond his control. With an obvious reference to *Heart of Darkness*, the *Nelly*, Kunzru's version of

Conrad's ship the *Nellie*, takes Jonathan and other white scholars to Africa. The narrator comically portrays Jonathan as naively expecting 'to be swallowed by towering forest trees, to feel he is approaching the primeval heart of a little-known continent' since 'this is what happens when you go up an African river' (p. 437). His supposition clearly evidences the power of colonial narratives, be they anthropological or literary, to determine the way in which the 'others' are to be imagined. Africa is the ancient world, far in time from the civilisation as much as in space. Having *Heart of Darkness* in mind or not, Jonathan is apparently familiar with something similar to its description of the continent as 'a prehistoric earth', 'an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet', 'the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone'.¹⁸⁴ However, what he really sees at the end of the river is:

a mean little village, and the ruins of a large iron-roofed shed, which a wooden cross in front indicates is a church. Parked beside it are two lorries, their flatbeds stacked with giant reels of cable, and all around, for perhaps half a mile in every direction, is a makeshift camp. (p. 438)

The expected field of anthropological study turns out to be another site of colonial contact where the 'modernising' process is actively in progress. Comparatively speaking, this journey takes Jonathan, who in his incarnation as Pran has experienced the partially 'modernised' India, back to the early moment of colonisation that India has already gone through before Pran was born. In other words, the temporal framework that marks the connection between India and West Africa as seen by Pran is the arrival of capitalist modernity that has reached the former before the latter. Following the journey of this character, the reader traces back towards the primal scene of the repetitive process of capitalisation, expanded globally through colonisation. Pran's global passages, thus, draw not a geographical map but a picture of a world-system with the British Empire at its core. Having seen India earlier in the novel, the reader could apprehend what would become of West Africa and get a glimpse of how the system works.

By the end of the book, after undergoing an exorcism, Pran seems to go back to a time before the inception of capitalism. The following contrasting pictures signify two kinds of relationship between men and animals. The first one is harmonious and equal; the second one is hierarchical and oppressive:

¹⁸⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), p. 63-64.

His camel casts a jaundiced eye on him, and as he walks beside it he is careful to keep out of the way of its legs. Together they trudge up the gentle windward slopes of the dunes, sliding down each leeward face in an ankle-deep cascade of sand.

Ahead of him plods a long line of camels, each tied to the one in front. Their haunches roll from side to side, the movement obscenely exaggerated by the bundles of trade goods tied to their backs. Their drovers tug on their halters and urge them on with songs and snatches of banter. (p. 481)

When juxtaposed with the former, the latter picture appears to epitomise the condition of modernity. The camels are 'tied', both to each other and to the 'trade goods' on their back, and controlled by their masters. In other words, they are forced to work for the benefits of men. By contrast, Pran's camel is treated with respect. They walk side by side like companions, away from human society. It could be argued that this final scene of the novel suggests the protagonist's return to an idealised pre-capitalist mode of being. This return to nothingness in spite of all the changes around him removes him from all conflicts and difficulties, as well as the brutal reality of colonisation that every other character must face. However, having learnt about 'secret' issues in the royal court of Fatehpur, the reader may not be too easily convinced to believe that such a return is possible. Apparently, the pre-capitalist world exists somewhere beyond the reach of the narrator's exceptional range of historical knowledge. More importantly, the process in which Pran becomes a total recluse is remarkably surreal. Unlike all of his other transformations that are backed up with realistic, though certainly unusual, explanations, this last one, from a white anthropologist to the nomadic loner, is made by sorcery. The magical intervention might implicate the impossibility of this mode of existence, which requires complete seclusion from other social beings in order to become part of nature, that is, to live in another ecosystem separate from the 'world' Pran used to know. It is a miracle, created by paranormal power, not a realistic outcome of any kind of resistance.

While Pran's move from one colony to another provides the reader with some information about what is going on at the peripheries, his experiences in England as a white wealthy man display a privileged outsider's perspective of the core. Leaving India for England with his newly acquired identity, Pran discovers for the first time what the centre of the colonial power looks like, and where the imposed cultural practices and lifestyle upheld in India as civilisation come from:

Everywhere Jonathan finds the originals of copies he has grown up with, all the absurdities of British India restored to sense by their natural environment. Here dark suits and high collars are the right thing to wear. Here thick black doors lead

away from the electric streets into cluttered drawing rooms, with narrow windows to frame squares of cold watery London light. (p. 299)

Seeing the artefacts of his previous existence as ‘copies’ of the metropole’s way of life, Pran realised that the ‘development’ brought from the colonial ‘home’ to its empire has changed the society only in a superficial level and is not at all suitable to the new environment; yet, it has a profound impact upon all the lives at the periphery. Apart from reflecting on his own country of origin in relation to the centre, from his current position Pran also has a chance to reconsider the narratives of the British empire more critically. In the Empire Exhibition, he is shocked by the sight of the Fotse that he has only vaguely known from the anthropological accounts:

He looks uneasily at the squatting men, with their blank faces and government-issue shorts. These are the subjects of Professor Chapel’s study? He has always thought of the Fotse in a very vague way: as a collection of attributes, a set of practices and artefacts only dimly attached to real bodies. Like that they had seemed rather noble; keepers of the past, possessors of ancient wisdom. Yet here, in all its horror, is blackness. (p. 381)

Like captive animals put in display, the Fotse appear to Pran everything but ‘possessors of ancient wisdom’. As a form of colonial narratives, academic discourses reduce human beings to sets of data, which could then be interpreted in whatever way the interpreters want to. The Fotse, it turns out, are the creation of Professor Chapel rather than the ‘real bodies’ of people outside the imagination of the professor’s audience. Therefore, it could be said that the study of ‘the squatting men’ is yet another attempt to keep them in the past, faraway in time as much as in space from the Self. As discussed earlier, this anthropological narrative will be thoroughly undermined in the final scenes of the novel.

Pran’s viewpoint is very crucial here for the examination of the colonial hegemonic power. As a colonial subject himself, this is the first time he has encountered other subjects from another colony. Yet, from his response to the human display, it is obvious that he is looking at them from the same position as the white metropolitans who know almost nothing about the racial others. All he can see is ‘blackness’, which has nothing to do with himself. The ‘horror’, here again an intertextual reference to the *Heart of Darkness*’s famous phrase, is seen by the colonial subject as extreme mundanity, which in turn ironically calls into question the credibility of imperialist knowledge about the other. Pran is, on one hand, like other Britons whose knowledge about the whole British Empire depends on colonial narratives, comically satirised through the novel’s portrayal of the Empire Exhibition; on the other hand, he renders visible the fact that, in this world-

system, the peripheries can only encounter each other through the centre, the telescope in which the distorted reality becomes seen as authentic.

Moreover, even though Pran at this point is in a privileged position, he appears to be more sensitive to the absurdity of colonial anthropological studies than other Britons. His bafflement suggests that he takes the accounts of the colonial subjects seriously and is upset when reality as he sees it does not correspond to them. Unlike Star, the professor's daughter, who clearly acknowledges that 'The Fotse are savages!' but also loves to wear their bangles, Pran cannot take the exhibits as pure spectacle or cultural objects that he should just consume. Reincarnating as a white middle-class male, he still has traces of the colonised, not because he identifies himself with the Fotse, since he obviously does not, but due to his belief in the power and sincerity of the coloniser's civilising mission. Born under the rule of the Empire, he is more affected by such colonial ideas as the 'noble savage' than Star, whose father even takes part in sustaining the idea. The fact that Pran is now at the centre does not rid him completely of the perspective of the periphery. He is unable to overlook the contradictions between the colonial discourse and reality like the white Britons are. Witnessing his confusion, therefore, the reader obtains an insight into the colonial hypocrisy that Pran himself may not actually realise.

Pran's (un)development in the combined and uneven world

It could be argued, then, that a better way to engage with the novel is to shift attention from the transparent protagonist to the situations in which he is placed. While Pran is trapped in the system and has to play his role in order to survive, the reader is given a bird's eye view of the network of power relations that Pran cannot comprehend. Evidently, different locations featured in the novel are connected via their coerced submission to capitalism. Following Pran, the reader is not exposed to a person's (un)development but the combined and uneven development of the world under the British Empire. Since Pran cannot be a reliable native informant of a particular colony, he appears as an individual of the transnational system, being both the oppressor and the oppressed depending on his relative position in a particular situation. In this light, he could be relatable in spite of his lack of fixed identity or any kind of political affiliations. In other words, the protagonist's transparency, that is, being devoid of inner self, does not necessarily prevent the reader's identification if he is seen as part of the totality of the novel. The reader could relate to him, not through emotional connection, but through shared experiences of being in the same systemic world of capitalism albeit in different eras.

The circular trope of the novel also brings to the fore how everything is related as a result of colonialism in this fictional world of *The Impressionist*. Apparently episodic, the novel starts with the interracial lovemaking of which Pran is a product, and ends with the engagement between Star, Pran's unrequited crush, and the new Nawab of Fatehpur. This minor incident, compared to the tragedy of the anthropologists in Africa that marks Pran's final transformation, may be seen as a trivial conclusion of a subplot. Nonetheless, it reminds the reader that other messy plots introduced in each episode continues even after Pran leaves the scenes. Obviously, the new Nawab is the younger brother of the old one. It means that, for whatever reasons, his orthodox brother passed away without an heir, and he, westernised and extravagant, has gained an endorsement from the colonial officer to succeed to the throne. The fact that the couple meets 'at a yacht party in Nice' emphasises the luxurious life-style of the Nawab, which requires a lot of money from the labour of his people back in the 'modernised' Fatehpur.

Remarkably, though both incidents could be subjected to the racist discourse of miscegenation, the action of Pran's Indian mother and English father is a taboo, while the young couple's marriage is an event to be celebrated. This circular plot might suggest the changing power relations between the coloniser and the colonised, or, even more likely, the success of the empire's capitalist 'civilising' mission despite the decline of its military power. In the scene where Pran's parents meet, the young Indian girl stubbornly refuses the 'modern' mean of transportation, which perplexes the English forester:

'And you have walked all the way?'
 'Yes, sir. The young mistress says walk only,'
 'Why on earth didn't you go by rail? Agra is hundreds of miles from here.'
 'Unfortunately train is out of the question. Such are extenuating circumstances, you see.' (p. 8)

Barely twenty years later, not only that the point of contact moves from the faraway colony to the European capital, suggesting the mobility of the colonial subjects exclusively available for the elite, another kind of hybrid is also put in prospect. While Pran's genesis makes him an outcast, not belonging either to Indian or English social groups, the marriage between an English woman with a respectable background and an Indian monarch is quite likely to produce native elites. Unlike Pran who needs to struggle to survive and manages to gain certain privilege only through disguise, they are born with prestige. Juxtaposing Pran's departure from human society with the potential arrival of a new kind of aristocracy, the ending of *The Impressionist* foreshadows the present-day 'post' colonial world in which the elite 'global' citizens roam freely while the 'others'

such as economic migrants and native workers are deprived of both social and geographical mobility. Ending with this elitist interracial consummation, the novel calls into the reader's attention the unevenness, not only between the coloniser and the colonised, but also among the colonial subjects themselves. Although they are similarly the results of colonial invasions, the privileged few could take further advantage from social and economic changes, while the common people have to struggle even more desperately to survive.

Admittedly, this focus on the totality of the novel rather than the life of the protagonist still divides readers into two groups: those who are able to identify intertextual elements and those who grasp only what is provided by the narration. Nonetheless, it moves away from the question of theoretical versus emotional engagement that marks the difference between the professional and general readers as discussed earlier. In place of disagreements based on different sets of value judgements, this reading offers an alternative way to identify with the characters in the novel through the experiences of being in the same unequal world of oppression and exploitation. The differing degree of literary and theoretical knowledge that a reader has is determined by his or her own position within this world-system. Therefore, I contend that professional readers, who are more capable of solving the puzzles that the writer creates than the lay readers need to be more critical of their own privileged place in both literary and political worlds that supply them with such expertise. The wider the gap between the two kinds of readers, the more visible the unequal distribution of knowledge, originated in the global North and circulated chiefly among the global elites.

As for the general readers, which are in this discussion 'peripheral' due to their limited access to the theoretical maze of *The Impressionist*, shifting focus from the protagonist allows them to choose their own points of identification based on their particular experiences. The same could also apply to the readers at the peripheral sites of reception. They may find some episodes more relatable than the others, while being introduced to different scenarios by the perceptive narrator. Readers from a particular reading community, therefore, could bring about their social and historical background to create a localised reading of the novel. Thai readers, for example, could engage more with the Empire exhibition scene from the viewpoint of the exhibited, since Thailand has a history of voluntary participations in similar events during the early twentieth century. A more detailed discussion on this will be provided in chapter 5, where I demonstrate possible ways in which the four novels examined in this thesis could be read in such a peripheral site as Thailand.

As we have seen, although *The Impressionist* is heavily informed by theoretical concepts and western literary references, theory-oriented reading is not the only way to approach the text. Taking the general readers' responses into account could motivate the professional readers to reflect on their own readings and their interpretive community as an institution. It also helps to develop a more inclusive approach of reading the novel, which has a strong resonance with those at the global peripheries when seen in its totality, not through just one ever-changing protagonist. In the next chapter, I will also look at the relationship between the *Bildungsroman* plot and the way in which a text is read. In the case of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, the narrative of the female protagonist's gradual self-development coincides with the capitalist ideology. Working in an almost melodramatic feminist mode, the novel makes the protagonist's progressive journey to liberation, with the help of the economic independence, unavoidably desirable and celebratory. In the light of its controversial context of reception, it could be argued that the book allies itself with the perspective of the 'core', even though it has the peripheral character as the focal point, and is marketed for the liberal feminists. I will discuss the way in which a reading from a peripheral perspective reveals this contradiction.

Chapter Four

Resisting *Brick Lane*: From peripheral characters to peripheral readers

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) can be considered as the most successful and renowned on the global stage, compared to the other three novels under study. Its critical and commercial success is widely recognised and mentioned so often that it has become part of the book's public profile. Ali herself is also categorised as one of the 'celebrity authors' of postcolonial writing.¹⁸⁵ The controversies around the publication of the book and its film adaptation are a distinct expression of the politics of representation; at the same time, they are an ideal advertisement for the book in this highly competitive literary marketplace. Both the issue of representation and the effects of market forces upon the novel have been examined by several literary critics.¹⁸⁶ The reception of the book appears in the forms of reviews, scholarly criticism, controversies around the publication, letters to the author, and even the film adaptation by Sarah Gavron. Globally, the book also has potential readers outside of the literary centre of London where it originates. However, several scholars appear to agree that the intended readers of the novel are white middle-class metropolitans. Although the authorial intention is impossible to verify, as I will discuss further, the novel's plot structure and resolution seem to suggest that these are indeed the text's implied readers. Therefore, among all the works I examine in this thesis, *Brick Lane* is the closest to presenting the literary commodification of the margins that critics such as Graham Huggan raise concerns about. Investigating how the book serves the demand of the majority reader is necessary for the comprehension of its possible impact upon diverse figures of readers through its global circulation. In this chapter, I will examine how the narrative form of the novel as female *Bildungsroman* interpellates the readers to identify with the focaliser and consequently to align with her ideological stance. Together with the novel's existing reception, this process of interpellation produces a particular reading framework and designates who is included or not as a reader.

In the first section, I demonstrate how the narrative aligns the readers with the perspective of the core, the economically and socially advanced citizens of Britain, and

¹⁸⁵ James Procter and Bethan Benwell, *Reading Across Worlds*, p. 145.

¹⁸⁶ For examples, Ruth Maxey, "'Representative' of British Asian fiction? The Critical Reception of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*" in *British Asian fiction: framing the contemporary*, ed. by Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), pp. 217-36; Sarah Brouillette, 'Literature and Gentrification on *Brick Lane*', *Criticism*, 51.3 (2009), 425-49; Rachel Bower, 'Epistolary Craft and the Literary Field', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49.3 (2014), 315-31.

at the same time invites them to identify with a representative of the periphery, the woman in the ethnic minority community. The protagonist's successful journey to self-liberation and integration into the core can be read as either realism or fantasy, depending on the position the reader takes. This reading formation is reflected through the reception of the novel, which I will look at in the second section. Using the controversies around the book as a point of departure, I discuss the significance of the unrecognised readers which betrays the unevenness in the literary world, the site of struggles that has a particular group of readers and writers at its core. This will lead to the last section where I demonstrate how peripheral perspectives are necessary for the readers to comprehend the reality of the world beyond the capitalist ideological construction.

Narrative of the female *Bildungsroman*: A tourist guide for female liberation

Brick Lane is narrated through the third person limited point of view of Nazneen, who moves from a village in Bangladesh to marry a man twice her age in London's East End. Set across several times and places, the story starts in 1967, when Nazneen is born, jumps to 1985 when she first arrives in Tower Hamlets, and sets much of the action in 2001, the year the 9/11 attacks took place in the US. Additionally, it portrays Dhaka in the late 20th century through the letters of Hasina, Nazneen's sister, which arrive sporadically throughout these 15 years. Hasina's life is full of tragedies, most of which are caused by men, and despite her rebellious character, she seems unable to escape from her desperate condition. As for the protagonist, when she first arrives in Tower Hamlets in East London, she knows no English besides 'Sorry' and 'Thank you', and is forced to adjust to life in the Bangladeshi community, located in a society where they are a marginalised minority group. The turning point of her life is when Chanu, her husband, buys her a sewing machine. This means of production enables her to earn money for her family, save money for her sister, and meet Karim who later becomes her secret lover; all these factors contribute to her self-liberation. Through her work, Nazneen goes to the marketplace as a garment labourer, even though she is physically at home due to the patriarchal restrictions of her community. In return, the financial independence initiated by this seemingly insignificant attempt to help her family finally liberates her from patriarchal domination. After a minor feminist twist when Nazneen declines Karim's marriage proposal, the novel ends with a kind of female utopia in which Nazneen lives with her two daughters and her best friend Razia while all the men are gone. Led by Razia, they can even start a business with other women in the community, producing 'fusion' clothes which are in demand in the market.

The novel is remarkable for shifting the emphasis from the usual postcolonial themes of immigrant writing, such as a sense of in-betweenness and the commodification of exotic people seen in texts like *The Buddha of Suburbia*, to global issues such as Islamic terrorism and female labour that link Nazneen to the world beyond her community in England. As a female *Bildungsroman* that chronicles the journey of the female protagonist to maturity, it seems to divert from the traditional *Bildungsroman* in which a girl becomes a mature woman who can fit into the patriarchal society. Starting as a good wife, Nazneen later commits adultery and, instead of eloping with her lover as readers who are familiar with romance novels might anticipate, eventually leaves both her husband and her lover. Her decision defies both social and religious conventions of her Bangladeshi Muslim community. The narrator's detailed elaboration of both inner thoughts and outer experiences takes the readers vicariously into the 'unknown' world of a female immigrant's domestic life, and at the same time makes the escape from its restrictions seem like a desirable goal. Nonetheless, while Nazneen's final transformation is certainly impressive, she in fact subjects herself to her circumstances until almost the last moment. Rather than struggling against all odds to free herself from restrictions, she keeps telling herself to accept and endure. What actually liberates her are external forces, such as the aforementioned financial problem. Liberal values about women's rights held by majority members of the British society into which her husband wants to be accepted also play a key role in Nazneen's liberation. Struggling to prove himself an 'educated' man, superior to other male members of the community who do not allow their women to work, Chanu introduces the job to Nazneen. As he emphasises, 'They are not modern. Not like me'.¹⁸⁷ Nazneen's development, from a passive, rural girl to an independent, determined woman, thus bespeaks the liberal outlook of Britain that enables such dramatic change. It is represented as a democratic society that opens up possibilities to everyone who can find the way. As Razia controversially tells Nazneen who is hesitant to skate with her sari on at the end of the novel, 'This is England...You can do whatever you like' (p. 415).¹⁸⁸ Therefore, it can be said that *Brick Lane*'s protagonist does not defy her fate with her own determination, but, rather, has learnt that she is allowed to do so in this particular national space that is Britain. Additionally, after abandoning the traditional values of her country of origin, she has become an economic agent, a good citizen with a new set of values such as individualism and self-improvement that allow her to integrate

¹⁸⁷ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 386. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁸⁸ See a discussion on contested readings of this ending in Procter and Benwell, *Reading Across Worlds*, pp. 101-104.

into her new society. Thus, regarding the convention of the *Bildungsroman* genre, *Brick Lane* is true to its typical formula.

Focusing on characters who are marginalised by class, race, and gender, this story of development interpellates its implied readers into identifying with two seemingly contradictory positions: the tourist and the empowered woman. The first one is an outsider who consumes other people's experiences as commodities while the second one is an insider who has lived experience of oppression. The selective omniscient point of view, which unfolds Nazneen's observations and thoughts in meticulous detail, renders possible this double position. On one hand, Nazneen is a guide who brings the tourists to the hidden world, that is, the world around her that she presents to the *outsiders*; on the other hand, she interpellates the readers to identify with her experiences, letting them into her universe so that they gain an impression of being the *insiders*.

The reader as a tourist

Following the gradual development of its protagonist, the novel invites the reader to go on a personal journey towards self-liberation with Nazneen, a newcomer to England who has very few survival skills. At the outset, Nazneen is 'new' to the Tower Hamlets community like the readers. Yet, as a 'real' Bangladeshi woman from the village, she seems to know a great deal about the conventions of her people, especially their religious practices. Nazneen thus appears as an insider of the Bangladeshi society while being an outsider of this ethnic community in London. With an innocent, fresh eye, she learns about the place together with the readers as the narrative continues. Her special position, being 'close' enough to the ethnic minorities to understand them and 'far' enough to criticise them, is the perfect position for an informant. In other words, she is an ideal guide for the readers who become her tourists.

Remarkably, the 'authentic' perspective of Nazneen is what a metropolitan reader might find exotic. A village girl who has never experienced the modern, urban world, she does not have any knowledge of her new living place, and usually tries to make sense of the unfamiliar by associating it with the familiar. When she ventures out to Brick Lane alone for the first time, she likens the sound of a car horn to 'an ancient muezzin ululating painfully, stretching his vocal cords to the limit' (p. 38). From the busy road, the reader is drawn not only to the spiritual atmosphere of the religious ceremony but also to the human voice as opposed to the machine. She also gains acquaintance with the hospital equipment by metaphorically taming it, comparing herself to a mahout who 'calms an angry elephant' (p. 97). By doing so she replaces technological modernity with husbandry,

and brings back a time when human beings were not alienated from their surroundings by machinery. Nazneen's inner comparison of contemporary Britain to another place that seems to dwell in a different time helps her cope with the sudden change of environment. At the same time, it implies that Nazneen not only travels through space, from rural Gouripur to urban London, but also through time. The implications of Nazneen's association of her homeland with the past will be discussed later in this chapter.

Additionally, Nazneen's early impressions of her surroundings, demonstrating her sense of alienation from both the Tower Hamlets community and contemporary London society, make them alluringly accessible for tourists. Portrayed as passive and reticent, she rarely speaks to other characters, but recounts almost every detail of what she encounters to the reader from the position of an outside observer, not as a member of either society. As Nazneen walks along the corridor of her residence, she looks at this 'hidden world' with the eye of a complete outsider:

They were all the same. Peeling red paint showing splinters of pale wood, a rectangular panel of glass with wire meshing suspended inside, gold rimmed keyholes. She walked faster. A door flew open and a head bobbed out in front of her. It was bald and red with unknown rage. (p. 37)

Wandering alone around an office block a little beyond Brick Lane, she observes busy people in the area, also with an outsider's eyes:

Every person who brushed past her on the pavement, every back she saw, was on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan: to get a promotion today, to be exactly on time for an appointment, to buy a newspaper with the right coins so that the exchange was swift and seamless, to walk without wasting a second and to reach the roadside just as the lights turned red. (p. 39-40)

Remarkably, both spaces are exoticised in different ways. While Nazneen's surroundings are mysterious and at times hostile, the business sector of London is full of activity yet systematic enough to be comprehensible. People in both descriptions are faceless, reduced to such body parts as 'head' and 'back', and show no interest in communicating with others. This defamiliarised perspective can be intriguing even for those who are familiar with the real places that are refreshingly retold. Also, it marks a starting point for Nazneen's gradual change of attitude towards the city as her dwelling place as the plot develops.

According to the book, London's financial district lies at the opposite end of the spectrum of development from Nazneen's village which she mentally revisits from time to time, while the community council seems to be stuck in the middle between the two

spaces. Her imagined home exists in ancient time, completely different from the hustle and bustle of Brick Lane. The Tower Hamlets community building, by contrast, is of modern architecture, but is old and uncared for. There is uniformity ('all the same'), but without order. It looks as if it has evolved to a certain point in time and just stops there. The description of different areas in London made by a freshly arrived rural girl may be less about the differences between the *inside* and the *outside* of the 'hidden' community within this metropolitan city than about the difference between the Fordist and late capitalist societies from the point of view of a person from the pre-capitalist world. Both are part of modernity, but the former cannot be integrated into the new world order of transnational business that demands specialised skills of the white-collar workers. It should also be noticed that, Nazneen embarks on her little adventure to the office block through Brick Lane, London's urbanised space which is simultaneously an ethnic space. The area that becomes the title of the novel is thus both the door to the *outside* world for Nazneen and the cultural border for the tourist readers of the book. It is the place that is most accessible for them, operating under modern, capitalist logic while allowing them to get a glimpse of the 'past' represented by an 'exotic' character like Nazneen.

As Nazneen's development continues, she does not gradually get closer to her local community but departs from it, not physically but mentally, and moves towards progression that is marked by economic independence. Her final success in freeing herself, not from the community but from the social confinement that its members are seen to cling to, indicates her decision to reject her old world and embrace the new one governed by capitalist logic. Thus, while her position as a local guide seems to offer her tourists an insider's knowledge about the unknown ethnic community, she is actually in the process of discovering the new, wider society, into which she later integrates through her entrepreneurial job and her adoption of a liberal attitude. Nazneen's journey is from the Bangladeshi to the British world, with Tower Hamlets as the passage to her new life. Guided by Nazneen, from a solitary, domestic, and dependent mode of existence to a liberal, independent life made possible by her work, the readers make the reverse journey back to the capitalist world that some of them might be already familiar with.

As evidenced by her journey to self-empowerment, Nazneen, an ideal labourer who is willing to work tirelessly for a relatively better life, is also an ideal guide for the tourist readers to apparently multicultural, democratic England, not the secluded Bangladeshi community in London that the title seems to suggest. As mentioned above, Nazneen primarily sees London's busy, urban life in a negative light. At the end of the novel, however, she prefers to stay in London rather than to go back to Bangladesh to

meet her sister. The matter of place is evidently crucial in maintaining her preferable life. Nazneen associates different conditions of life with different national spaces according to her lived experiences. Persuaded by her husband to go to Dhaka, she tries to imagine their lives there:

Would we sit like this in Dhaka? In a room like this? *And would we sit like this and would it feel just the same and would everything be the same but just in a different place?* (p. 310)

Even though they are the same people, Nazneen is not sure if the structure of their relationship will be the same in Dhaka. The quality of the place determines the condition of their total beings—the way they see themselves in relation to others and hence the way they think and behave. Here, Nazneen is not comparing Dhaka to Tower Hamlets, since the members of both communities and the set of values they hold are not essentially different. What makes Tower Hamlets more liveable is the outside influence of Britain, the multicultural space that could simultaneously accommodate her and rid her of the oppressive patriarchal tradition. Her experiences are contrasted with those of her sister in Dhaka, emphasising the role of the place in shaping the fate of people within it. Looking at the way the narrative interpellates the readers to identify with Nazneen as a woman, directly experiencing and witnessing gender oppression, we can see the effect of physical spaces upon female characters, albeit as understood by Nazneen, even more clearly.

The reader as a self-liberated woman

Patriarchal oppression is central to the experiences of all the female characters in *Brick Lane*. Considering Nazneen's different reactions to male and female characters' speech, we can see how gender is significantly highlighted and implicated in the final resolution of the novel. Putting herself in the position of the audience, Nazneen 'reads' other characters from what they say and chooses to identify with some and not others. The readers who also read these characters from Nazneen's perspective, that is, from the eyes of a woman in the minority community with a limited degree of freedom, are exposed to a world of patriarchal oppression that already comes with a strong feminist critique. This narrative technique could be compared to the self-reflexive performances in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. While Karim's performances are seen by different kinds of audience who respond differently, *Brick Lane* makes Nazneen the only audience the reader could identify with and her commentary the only way to 'interpret' other characters' stories. Remarkably, everything Nazneen knows and reflects upon leads to her gender liberation.

Therefore, even though the voices of the other characters introduce several important issues, for examples, ideas of racial prejudice from Chanu, political Islam from Karim, tension between family and community from Razia, and female labourers in the workplace from Hasina, they are subjected to different degrees of emphasis and reduced to a mere function as justification for Nazneen's actions and decisions.

The two male characters who have the biggest roles in the novel are Chanu, Nazneen's husband, and Karim, her lover. They both consistently talk about grand concepts and important political issues. Yet, from Nazneen's viewpoint, their behaviours reveal their desire to feel a sense of belonging, which emphasises their psychological state rather than the political significance of the speeches. Beginning as totally different kinds of men and ending up as similar, failed characters, Chanu and Karim contribute to Nazneen's disillusionment, which is crucial in this feminist *Bildungsroman* plot. Though Karim initiates her sense of independence, Nazneen finally finds out that she cannot rely on either of them but must help herself. To renounce the position of the listener and make her own statement is thus a necessary step towards freedom. Therefore, the political issues about unequal opportunities and violence that are based on racial and religious prejudice are introduced by Chanu and Karim only to be criticised and abandoned, while the importance of Nazneen's transformation is foregrounded. The content of what they say is recounted to the readers from Nazneen's indifferent and sometimes judgemental perspective, in contrast with female characters' stories that are more relevant to Nazneen and thus carry more weight within the plot.

Studying 'Race, Ethnicity and Class' at the Open University, Chanu often educates his children on the glorious history of Bangladesh and the British empire's exploitation of the country. This anti-colonial critique, which becomes even more pronounced after the 9/11 attacks, indicates to some extent Chanu's political stance, but it is presented through Nazneen's point of view as his personal desire to be heard and accepted as part of a respectable sector of the host country. Nazneen observes from the position of the audience that, while talking, he does not directly address her but seems to speak to an invisible crowd:

He talked and she listened. Often she had the feeling he was not talking to her, or rather that she was only part of a larger audience for whom the speech was meant. He smiled at her but his eyes were always searching, as if she were a face in the crowd singled out for only a moment. (p. 28)

Karim, who first appears to Nazneen as a foil for Chanu, is later seen as degenerating into another version of Chanu, albeit more politically engaged. When he is first introduced,

he has a real audience as the head of a local Muslim political group called the Bengal Tigers, whose missions are to protect the 'local ummah' and support the 'global ummah' (p. 196). However, after the tension between the Muslim immigrants and the English white working class gets worse as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks, he turns to Nazneen as a substitute for his absent audience just like Chanu does, as the text makes explicit:

'They should get their facts straight.' He folded his arms and looked beyond Nazneen. [...] 'Islamic terrorists. Islamic terrorists. That's all you hear. You never hear Catholic terrorist, do you? Or Hindu terrorist? What about Jewish terrorist?' It seemed that just as Chanu had lost an invisible audience, Karim had gained one. He orated to the assembly. 'But let's think about it....' (p. 341)

His reaction towards the situation suggests a similar psychological profile to Chanu: he needs to feel that he belongs to a group and has a position of authority. The difference is that, while Chanu wants to be accepted into white English society, Karim, a British Bangladeshi who has never been to Bangladesh, tries to be an integral part of his community by emphasising his religious identity. As Nazneen later concludes after she decides to leave him, 'Karim did not have his place in the world. That was why he defended it' (p. 377).

From Nazneen's perspective, both men exploit her to bolster their self-esteem while her own problems are ignored. The social and political issues that they talk about or engage with appear to derive from their personal struggles to feel a sense of social belonging. The fact that, at the end of the novel, Chanu defeatedly goes back to Bangladesh and Karim is nowhere to be seen while Nazneen stays with her daughters emphasises the meaninglessness of their speeches for Nazneen, and thus for the reader. It can also be argued that the 9/11 attacks are introduced in the novel as a catalyst for changes that enable Nazneen to get rid of the men and liberate herself. Accordingly, after they are gone, the women who stay are barely affected by the political tension resulting from the incidents, as if the problems that Chanu and Karim struggle against were eradicated together with their departure. Also, it can be said that, through Nazneen's viewpoint, the readers are interpellated to overlook other issues that do not directly obstruct her road to liberation. They are encouraged to listen to Chanu and Karim from Nazneen's position, not as 'an invisible audience' with whom both men try to communicate. In other words, following Nazneen's progress, the readers may find it justifiable to ignore the two men's appeals for attention.

In contrast with the male characters' speeches, the stories of female characters are incorporated into Nazneen's narrative as if they were her own. They have a crucial

function of encouraging Nazneen to liberate from her passive and dependent status. Razia, Nazneen's best friend, is a strong-minded woman with a religious husband who works extremely hard to be able to donate money to the mosques, in hope of a better afterlife. For Chanu who feels that he is superior to most of the members of the community, Razia is not a 'respectable' type of community member. Unlike Nazneen, she is assertive; she knows what she wants and is able to demand it. Nazneen enjoys her company, and Razia always tells Nazneen about what happens in her family as well as in the community. This is how Nazneen learns about the problems of other people in the community even though she is not exactly part of it. What is remarkable is the way Nazneen engages with Razia's stories. In contrast with her reaction to Chanu or Karim's speeches, the account of Razia's experiences from Nazneen's point of view demonstrates her involvement in them. The narrative voice is seamlessly blended with Razia's, eradicating the distance between them:

Razia tackled him. Building mosques and killing *your* own children. Holy man.

He did not flinch. What *you* want me to do? Kill my own self, working and working, for *you* to spend it all on penny-thing here, penny-thing there and nothing to show at the end? I am working for bricks. When I am gone to dust, they will be standing.

Ha, she said, and whenever they crossed paths, the brick man!

Ask *your* father, she had told Shefali, ask him how many bricks he earn today. Shefali, twisting her hair, said, Abba, how many bricks *you* earn today? And landed on her back, and cried quietly into her mother's lap. (pp. 97-98, emphasis added)

Remarkably, while Karim's speech above is reproduced in direct quotation, showing the distance between the talker and the listener, Razia's is retold in free indirect speech. Nazneen's incorporates Razia's voice into her own, recounting the quarrel scene as if she was actually in it. The words 'you/your' in different sentences that refer to different characters interpellate the reader to take the same position as Nazneen, who not only listens to her friend but also identifies with her struggle as a wife and a mother. Female domestic problems are highlighted in the narrative through this process of interpellation. While Nazneen distances herself from the issues that Chanu and Karim are concerned with, she regards Razia's experiences as part of her own. In other words, she is not just an audience, but a participant.

While Razia provides Nazneen lessons about dogmatic religious belief and over-attachment to their home country, her sister Hasina warns her against Bangladesh, and

frees her from 'fate', the mental prison created by her mother. Brought up with the story of 'How You Were Left To Your Fate', Nazneen is grateful for her mother's resolution not to fight against fate when she was born and did not feed. When her own son was sick, she tried to save his life and almost believed that she could defy fate before he suddenly died. During the time when Nazneen hesitates over following Chanu to Bangladesh, she dreams of her mother, hatefully accusing her of killing her own son: 'You thought it was you who had the power. You thought you would keep him alive. You decided you would be the one to choose' (p. 364).¹⁸⁹ The ghost of Nazneen's mother represents an irrational commitment to fate, the supernaturally predetermined course of life that is external to oneself that haunts Nazneen from past to present, from her childhood in the village to her adulthood in the metropolis. Manifestly, fate is presented as opposite to free will. It is incompatible with the modern world, and Nazneen needs to defy it by choosing her own path in life.

However, as Hasina's life reveals, free will is actually not a choice for every character in *Brick Lane*'s fictional universe. Through a series of letters arriving intermittently during her fifteen years in England, both Nazneen and the reader learn about Hasina's life and about Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh that is nothing like their childhood village. Like other big cities, it is filled with factories, crime, pollution and corrupted people. Since eloping with the man she loves, Hasina has gone through successive tragedies: she has been beaten by her husband, raped by her landlord, and dismissed from her job. Afterwards, she is coercively turned into a prostitute, is married off and almost immediately dumped, and finally becomes a maid. Although she does not submit herself to faith like Nazneen initially does, Hasina cannot actually control anything and seems to be facing an inescapable loop of tragedies. Rebellious as she is, her 'fate' is nonetheless determined by an external force. It may not be a supernatural power but a *man-made* patriarchal system of the society in which she lives that governs women's lives in a similar manner from generation to generation. Presenting the notion of fate as part of the oppressive system from the premodern world, the novel ironically confirms that somehow it is impossible to escape it. The only escape for the mother is death; the sister's is unlikely to be different. The fact that the indecisive Nazneen resolves not to go back to Bangladesh immediately after she knows about her mother's suicide indicates that 'fate' has something to do with her home country. Apparently, to avoid such

¹⁸⁹ This phrase bears an obvious resemblance to the title of Naila Kabeer's book, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labor Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (2000), that Ali acknowledges as an inspiration for *Brick Lane*. The significance of this book will be discussed later in this chapter.

a fate is not to rebel against it from *within* as Hasina does, but to abandon it altogether and start a new life.

Evidently, both Razia and Hasina are Nazneen's inspiration in opposite ways; the former is a model that encourages her to stay in London, while the latter keeps her away from Dhaka. Their voices are incorporated into Nazneen's, unlike Chanu's and Karim's voices from which Nazneen distances herself as a passive audience. This is how the narrative separates the 'male' issues, the political and public, from the 'female' ones, the personal and domestic, and places emphasis on the latter. The underlying message is, in such a strong patriarchal society as the Bangladeshi communities both in England and Bangladesh, female members have enough of their own problems which are actually caused by men. What Nazneen needs to do, therefore, is to free herself from this patriarchal power structure through female bonding, which is only possible in England. As Valman points out, 'the novel truncates such global consciousness, and instead turns Nazneen's focus inwards, back towards a sense of power over her immediate physical environment'.¹⁹⁰ The political issues such as racial prejudice in the workplace or the discourse of Islamic terrorism are introduced in the novel to show how far-fetched they are from the female perspectives, not to be resolved.

The novel's interpellation of the readers to inhabit both the position of the tourist, with Nazneen as a guide, and the position of the woman who witnesses several forms of patriarchal oppression, is central to *Brick Lane*'s constitution as a female *Bildungsroman* narrative. The readers simultaneously occupy outside and inside positions within Nazneen's Bangladeshi community. They are also invited to evaluate the two different worlds, the old Bangladesh and the new Britain, that Nazneen portrays in contrast with each other. Witnessing from within the gradual change of Nazneen's attitude towards these geographical and social spaces, the readers are encouraged to endorse the kind of society that makes Nazneen's self-liberation possible, that is, the capitalist society that seems to benefit both the white middle-class and women of any social or ethnic class. Arguably, the readers that might be able to adopt these positions most effortlessly are the white middle-class metropolitan and the liberal feminist readers. From their social and ideological positions, these two groups of readers could see the world outside the Bangladeshi community, portrayed as a male-dominated society, as a liberal space, a refuge for those deserting their unliveable home for a more 'civilised' condition of life. In contrast, people in other social groups, such as the white working-class or the male

¹⁹⁰ Nadia Valman, 'The East End *Bildungsroman* from Israel Zangwill to Monica Ali', *Wasafiri* 24.1 (2009), 3-8 (p.6).

members of ethnic communities in Britain, may find themselves alienated from the text. Notably, the British working-class are mentioned collectively as part of the same wretched environment where Nazneen lives. They initiate the racist movements that threaten the sense of security of ethnic minorities in the novel, even though they are cleared away once the male characters are gone. Thus, racism here has no relation to the middle-class Britons or readers who identify with a liberal society like multicultural London. Through reading, they can even engage in an ethical act by mentally supporting Nazneen to escape from her awful conditions. This reading experience that the novel makes available could be compared to the presentation of the white working-class in *Anita and Me* that I have discussed in chapter 2.

The identities of the implied readers suggested by the text closely coincide with its modes of reception to date. The controversies around the novel, which are preceded by reviews and succeeded by a number of scholarly works, reveal that the two groups of readers mentioned above are recognised as readers while male members of ethnic minority groups are not. The next section discusses how several kinds of reception reflect and realise the reading formation created by the text. As class, race, and gender intersect in this field of reception, I will demonstrate why it is necessary to develop a reading approach that resists the *Bildungsroman* narrative, and how it could be done by shifting the focus to the peripheral perspectives that are ignored by the protagonist.

The recognised and unrecognised readers

Brick Lane has been shortlisted for several literary awards including the Booker Prize, translated into almost 30 languages, and sold around 700,000 copies in the UK alone after two years of publication.¹⁹¹ Nonetheless, what is really exceptional is Ali's six-figure advance by Doubleday and the fact that she was listed in *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists even before *Brick Lane*, her first novel, was published. A number of critics have attempted to account for this unusual success. According to Garrett Ziegler, it is the combination of 'a ripe market, a notable personal background, and a sensational publishing history' that makes *Brick Lane* 'something of a phenomenon rather than simply a novel'.¹⁹² Ali's background as an Oxford graduate and a daughter of an English mother and a Bangladeshi father whose family fled to Britain during the Bangladeshi war of 1971, along with public enthusiasm for emerging female minority writers in the UK

¹⁹¹ Maxey, p. 219.

¹⁹² Garrett Ziegler, 'East of the City: Brick Lane, Capitalism, and the Global Metropolis', *Race/ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, 1.1 (2007), 145-67 (p. 147).

and the US such as Zadie Smith and Jhumpa Lahiri, paved the way for Ali to easily gain attention in the media as well as in the market. Ruth Maxey notes that *Brick Lane*'s revelation of the hidden world within metropolitan London is a 'fashionable novelty' that many reviewers were enthusiastic about.¹⁹³ Also of particular importance is the publisher's marketing scheme, which included the book's promotion in *The Richard and Judy Show*, a popular British TV programme.¹⁹⁴ Brouillette, on the other hand, focuses on the marketing of the area of Brick Lane itself as London's 'Banglatown'. She argues that the novel is embraced by the publisher because of its setting. When the novel was written, parts of London's East End had just gone through the gentrification process, attracting tourists, young artists and home buyers, which almost guaranteed public interest in the life of people living in this previously inaccessible area for the white majority; therefore, 'without Banglatown there may not have been a *Brick Lane*'.¹⁹⁵

The presumed identity of the readers of the book seems to be tacitly understood among reviewers. When Geraldine Bedell talks about the novel as 'an exploration of a community that is so quintessentially British that it has given *us* our national dish, but of which most of *us* are entirely ignorant,' she addresses to British middle-class people who have South Asian cuisine as '*our* national dish' but know nothing about the ethnic group that originated it.¹⁹⁶ Similarly, criticising Ali's 'inauthenticity', Greer points out that Ali is well aware of 'what will appear odd but plausible to a British audience'.¹⁹⁷ Michael Gorra's view from the US gives a more distant perspective. He is certain that Ali 'expects her readers to fill in the particulars of the city that surrounds her characters'; however, there is no problem for 'us', who do not know much about London, to imagine the lives in the story since 'their point of reference isn't London but Dhaka.'¹⁹⁸ Although he and his audience, the *New York Times*' readers, are not familiar with Britain's capital city like the locals, they can enjoy the book anyway since it actually refers to Bangladesh. It is remarkable that, for this reviewer, while London can be filled in with 'the particulars' only by those who know it, Dhaka is accessible for everyone through the act of reading. Therefore, we have both local readers, which from both Greer and Gorra's views might

¹⁹³ Maxey, p. 221.

¹⁹⁴ Maxey, p. 220.

¹⁹⁵ Brouillette, 'Literature and Gentrification on Brick Lane', p. 439.

¹⁹⁶ Geraldine Bedell, 'Full of East End promise', *Guardian*, 15 June 2003

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jun/15/fiction.features1>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017] (emphasis added).

¹⁹⁷ Germaine Greer, 'Reality bites', *Guardian*, 24 July 2006

<<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/jul/24/culture.books>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017].

¹⁹⁸ Michael Gorra, 'East Enders', *New York Times*, 7 Sep 2003

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/books/east-enders.html?mcubz=1>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017].

be the primary target, and American readers who consider *Brick Lane* as a key to enter into another world they are not acquainted with, regardless of their proximity to that world. These readers are likely to associate the novel with the realist representations of both ethnic minorities in England and Bangladeshis in their homeland. Some may believe they could travel to the protagonist's country of origin through the narrative produced at the literary centre 'seven seas and thirteen rivers' away from Bangladesh.¹⁹⁹

In her discussion of the critical reception of *Brick Lane*, Maxey considers the relationship between the book's location and its success among white-middle class readers at some length, noting that the white critics who see the novel as an entrance to a 'hidden world' are based in London.²⁰⁰ This suggests the city's central position within the literary market as well as in academia. Even when Scribner, the American publisher of the book, hesitated over using a title referring to an area well-known only among Londoners, the conflict was easily resolved when Ali was put in *Granta*'s list of Young British Novelists. Doubleday's publishing director said that the nomination made the title *Brick Lane* into 'a brand', and hence 'it doesn't matter if it refers to a street in London or anything else'.²⁰¹ Therefore, it can be said that the novel was initially marketed at white British readers, but it also becomes an 'international' product because of the value given by *Granta*, a major representative of London as a literary centre, and recognised by New York, another centre in the same English-speaking world. With its content about the immigrants from Bangladesh settling in London and its global circulation in the market, *Brick Lane* appears to be a creative work that transcends national boundaries on several levels. However, it is actually received through the binary inside/outside perspective that is based on a national framework, whether by the locals, inside England but outside Brick Lane, or the foreigners looking into a Bangladeshi world from the outside. The reading positions of both the local and the foreign readers at the metropolises are reminiscent of Huggan's identification of the readership of postcolonial literature as the touristic white metropolitan reader.

There is also another group of readers that might identify with the characters in the novel: Bangladeshi immigrants and their descendants in the UK. While they may not be considered as the main target for publishers, as I have discussed in chapter 1 and 2, Kureishi and Syal's novels played an important role in the self-formation of the second-

¹⁹⁹ *Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* was the original title of *Brick Lane* before the publisher suggested Ali to change it.

²⁰⁰ Maxey, p. 221.

²⁰¹ David Smith, 'It's Brick Lane by any other name', *Guardian*, 14 Sep 2003

<<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/sep/14/bookerprize2003.usa>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017].

generation immigrant readers of the 1990s. During the early development of the writing by women with ethnic minority backgrounds in the 1980s, minority readers ‘who were looking to literature for depictions of experience of life in Britain with which they could identify’ contributed to the writers’ awareness of the existence of their audience. Admittedly, in order to become visible in British publishing industry, these writers needed to depict such an experience ‘in ways that also spoke to a largely white readership’.²⁰² Nonetheless, the initial significance of the minority reading communities in determining the symbolic value of minority writing cannot be overlooked. Even when the writers did not speak *to* them, they were expected to at least speak *for* them. For some critics, they could even be a reference point for both approval and criticism of the work as seen in my discussion of the politics of representation in the late 1970s and 1980s in chapter 1.

Yet, the controversies around *Brick Lane*, including responses from academia, show that not every group of minority readers is recognised as such. The voices of (mainly male) British Bangladeshis who protest against the book and film adaptation have been dismissed in the name of the freedom of expression. That is, those who oppose the book are not considered as its readers/reviewers even though they belong to the community it purports to represent, at least for the white metropolitans who presumably comprise the majority of *Brick Lane*’s readership. These non-readers even helped boost the sale figure through their act of disapproval. The case, on one hand, reflects the continuing decline of the politics of representation, due partly to pioneering works by such writers as Kureishi in the early 1990s. On the other hand, it indicates the unequal weight different interpretive communities carry in a particular site of reception.

The cultural landscape across Europe and North America in the late 1990s that leans towards multiculturalism, combined with the local enthusiasm for the new gentrified area, certainly eases *Brick Lane*’s engagement with ethnic minorities in London into the core of the literary marketplace. At the same time, this condition subjects the novel to the politics of representation and leads to its divided audiences. In spite of several favourable reviews the book received soon after publication, the Greater Sylhet Welfare and Development Council (GSWDC) wrote a lengthy letter to Ali, objecting to her depiction of the community. This same letter was also sent to the chairman of the Booker Prize committee in 2003 and the *Guardian*, in order to protest *Brick Lane*’s nomination for both the Booker and the Guardian First Book Award. Similarly, the attempt of the

²⁰² Chris Weedon, ‘Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women’s Writing’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 2.1 (2008), 17-35 (p. 21).

production team of Sarah Gavron's film adaptation to use Brick Lane as a filming location in 2006 faced local opposition. The community council's objection to the book was echoed by Germaine Greer, who accused Ali of building 'a marvellously creative elaboration on a pre-existing stereotype'.²⁰³

Remarkably, instead of depriving *Brick Lane* of its popularity, these controversies have given the book a continuing visibility in literary criticism and a place alongside the work of more established writers, including Salman Rushdie. The claim of the council's spokesman that the novel is 'a completely stereotypical view of Bangladeshis living in Brick Lane' was answered by Doubleday's publishing director that the views of a fictional character 'should not be confused with those of the author'.²⁰⁴ Additionally, although *Brick Lane* did not win the Booker Prize, DJ Taylor, one of the judges, said that the protest against it did not affect the decision. The GSWDC's association of the case with Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, which was famously burnt in protests in Bradford in 1989, worsened their situation, since the judge announced that 'we do not want to go down that road again'.²⁰⁵ In response to Greer's criticism, Rushdie referred to her similar reaction to the assault against his own book years ago, when he was described by Greer as 'an Englishman with dark skin', which appeared to him as 'a kind of double racism'.²⁰⁶ Hari Kunzru, another up-and-coming British South Asian author whose debut novel was discussed in the last chapter, also furiously announced in his letter to the *Guardian* defending Ali that 'I will not accept that I have any a prior responsibility to anyone — white, black or brown, let alone any 'community' — to represent them in any particular way'.²⁰⁷ This kind of response could be understood in the writer's literary context of the early 2000s, when denouncing the burden of representation had become an accepted way for minority writers to position themselves in the market.

However, it is undeniable that *Brick Lane*'s representation of ethnic minority characters is central to its popularity, even though people who participate in creating the novel's value try to avoid the fact. In his *Guardian* article 'It's only a novel...', Ian Jack, the editor of *Granta* magazine at the time, admits that he and his fellow judges like *Brick Lane* because they feel that the book provides them 'a glimpse of what life might be like'

²⁰³ Greer, 'Reality bites'.

²⁰⁴ Matthew Taylor, 'Brickbats fly as community brands novel "despicable"', *Guardian*, 3 Dec 2003 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/dec/03/books.arts>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017]

²⁰⁵ Taylor, 'Brickbats fly'.

²⁰⁶ Salman Rushdie, 'Brickbats fly over Brick Lane', *Guardian*, 29 July 2006 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jul/29/comment.letters>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017]

²⁰⁷ Hari Kunzru, 'Brick Lane's many narratives', *Guardian*, 29 Oct 2007 <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/oct/29/immigration.books>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017]

among the community in question.²⁰⁸ Though he is well aware that it is not ‘a strictly literary reason’, by emphasising that none of the judges were Bangladeshis from London’s East End, he seems to put Ali in the position of a knowing informant, or at least one who knows more than the judges. Similarly, while insisting that the novel is a work of fiction, Matthew Taylor proclaims that, as a Bangladeshi, Ali ‘presumably knows a good deal about’ *Brick Lane*.²⁰⁹ Ali herself, who is very skeptical of the question of authenticity²¹⁰ and is even reported to have said, ‘you don’t even have to go there. You only need to know how to use a search engine’,²¹¹ also claims that she drew on her own childhood when writing *Brick Lane*, though not ‘in a way that was particularly autobiographical in any straightforward way’.²¹² According to Ruth Maxey, Ali still feels that she needs to prove the Bangladeshi side of her identity. In an interview about her favourite restaurant in London, she says that she has a very different idea about good curry, and that the owner of the restaurant could distinguish her from the Spanish customers when he noticed that she ate the curry and naan with her fingers.²¹³

Considerable evidence of *Brick Lane*’s self-association with the representation of Bangladeshi people in the UK, therefore, renders the argument for aesthetic freedom less relevant than the protest against the book by the male Sylhetis. As has been discussed in ‘Not Reading *Brick Lane*’, the disagreement between literary critics and the protesters might result from the different ways in which the specialist and the lay readers (including non-readers and partial readers) approach the text.²¹⁴ The more easily the protests are dismissed, the more pronounced the unequal power between different groups of readers. As evidenced by the letter sent to Random House by the chairman of the community council, at least one member of the dissenting group did read the book. The writer even cites several passages from the text to support his opposition to it.²¹⁵ The fact that the protesters still fail as readers for many critics and writers, then, suggests that their reading, or some might say ‘misreading’, is not valued by some authoritative members of *Brick*

²⁰⁸ Ian Jack, ‘It’s only a novel...’, *The Guardian*, 20 Dec 2003

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/dec/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview3>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017]

²⁰⁹ Taylor, ‘Brickbats fly’.

²¹⁰ Monica Ali, ‘The outrage economy’, *The Guardian*, 13 Oct 2007

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/13/fiction.film>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017]

²¹¹ Emdad Rahman, ‘The PR money can’t buy’, *The Guardian*, 1 Aug 2006

<<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/aug/01/theprmoneycantbuy1>> [accessed 8 Aug 2017]

²¹² Diran Adebayo, ‘Monica Ali with Diran Adebayo’, in *Writing across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, ed. by Nasta, p. 346, cited in Weedon, p. 27.

²¹³ Maxey, p. 231.

²¹⁴ Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson, ‘Not Reading *Brick Lane*’, *New Formations*, 73 (Winter 2011), 90-116.

²¹⁵ Benwell, Procter and Robinson, p. 106.

Lane's interpretive communities. As Benwell et al contend, we need to be aware of 'the very real differences and asymmetries in social position between alternative kinds of reader, and the varied social impact of their reading practices'.²¹⁶ There is an obvious connection between the social status of the male Sylhetis in London and the relative unimportance of their criticism of the novel.

I would further argue that, apart from understanding the discrepancy between the professional readers and the protesters in the light of reader/non-reader position-taking, we could take the latter as constitutive parts of a more inclusive reading framework. In other words, the protesters' 'reading', particularly their insistence on *Brick Lane*'s burden of representation, could inform the way in which professional readers approach the text. It also provides a clue with which the ideological impact of the novel upon other peripheral readers in the global market can be understood. Nonetheless, what makes *Brick Lane*'s controversies even more complicated is the gender perspective that could be argued to generate positive effects for the female members of the represented minority group and other women with similar circumstances. Therefore, though it is denounced by the male-dominated community's leaders, it is difficult to say that the book abandons the idea of a moral obligation to British Bangladeshis altogether. The tension between class, race and gender that the publication of *Brick Lane* presents makes an intersectional reading of the novel a challenging task, especially at the peripheral sites of reception. The novel's explicit self-positioning as a feminist text, therefore, needs a careful examination, before we go on to address a possible reading approach that *Brick Lane*'s ambiguous position towards the represented minority community could generate.

Problematising *Brick Lane* as a feminist text

The celebration of female power in *Brick Lane* is almost unmissable. With a good (female) friend and a little bit of hard work, Nazneen proves that a woman can be spiritually and economically independent regardless of their ethnicity. In this respect, the novel appears to speak 'for', and probably even 'to', ethnic minority women who face oppression by the male members of their communities. The author stressed this fact when talking about the 'positive responses' from the wider audiences of Bangladeshi descent, in contrast to the oppositions to the book by the comparatively small number of the protesters:

People sometimes ask me if I have been saddened by the reaction to the novel of people with a Bangladeshi heritage. I explain that I have, over several years, had

²¹⁶ Benwell, Procter and Robinson, p. 110.

an overwhelmingly positive response from people of Bangladeshi descent who have read *Brick Lane*, both in London and around the world. I have a boxful of letters in which people tell me how this character reminded them of that relative, and a number in which young women confide their experience of arranged marriage.²¹⁷

As Benwell et al argue, Ali obviously contrasts these readers' 'well-informed and "authentic" responses to the text' with those of the non-readers who are 'furnished with "rumoured" and false contents of the text'.²¹⁸ She continues to add that, in a literary festival, she was angrily questioned by an Asian female audience member about why she avoids articulating the real reason for the community leaders' protest against the book, that is, 'They don't like a story which is about female self-empowerment'.²¹⁹ This comment is particularly important to the debates over the novel's burden of representation since it treats *Brick Lane* as inspirational rather than representational. Moreover, by associating Bangladeshi readers in London with those around the world, Ali locates the novel in the global context, which is notably different from 'international' circulation among metropolitan readers. Obviously, this ability to reach the audience through the shared experiences of gender oppression is used as the novel's symbolic value to weigh against the accusation of misrepresentation by British Bangladeshi men.

Nonetheless, the novel's portrayal of the suppressed voice of female individuals in Bangladesh through Nazneen's recounting of her sister's stories renders problematic its feminist self-positioning. As Michael Perfect points out in his investigation of Ali's manipulation of the information in Naila Kabeer's *The Power to Choose*, *Brick Lane* 'seems to invert rather than replicate' the finding that women in Dhaka rather than London 'are experiencing an increase in personal agency'.²²⁰ Kabeer's account of her field research on the female workers in London and Dhaka clearly contradicts Nazneen and Hasina's experiences. Unlike those in London, women in Dhaka are able to work actively towards their self-empowerment and to negotiate with social and religious norms on the basis of financial necessity. Moreover, while Kabeer attributes the limited freedom of movement of the female garment workers in London to both 'the patriarchal structures of the Bangladeshi community' and 'the exclusions of mainstream Britain', Ali apparently focuses on the former and obscures the latter.²²¹ Arguably, the novel's

²¹⁷ Ali, 'The outrage economy'.

²¹⁸ Benwell, Procter and Robinson, p. 97.

²¹⁹ Ali, 'The outrage economy'.

²²⁰ Michael Perfect, 'The Multicultural *Bildungsroman*: Stereotypes in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43.3 (2008), 109-120 (p. 118).

²²¹ Rehana Ahmed, 'Brick Lane: A Materialist Reading of the Novel and Its Reception', *Race & Class*, 52.2 (2010), 25-42, p. 32.

depictions of Nazneen's 'power to choose' and Hasina's lack of it seems to celebrate an already 'liberal' environment as experienced by Nazneen rather than calling for actions on the part of the readers in order to actualise such an environment in the real world.

Interestingly, *Brick Lane* self-consciously addresses the contradiction between Kabeer's study and the novel's portrayal of female garment workers in the two countries by highlighting the potential lack of compatibility between the academic study and the individual's experiences. In a scene when Chanu tries to persuade his family to move to Bangladesh, he boasts about the country's top position in the London School of Economics' rank of 'the World Happiest Survey'. Nazneen, in response, gives away her sister's secret that she has kept for years:

'No. I don't believe this survey. What kind of professors are these?

[...]

She was unsure why she had spoken. She did not know if she believed the newspaper report or not. Finally, she said, 'My sister -- she is not happy.'

'But Hasina is very happy,' insisted Chanu.

'No, she is not. Has not been ...' said Nazneen. And she started to tell him the things she had hidden from him over the years, and at first she stumbled around as if it were lies she were telling and not the truth, and then the words began to flow and he was stiller than she had ever seen him. (p. 291)

Remarkably, the personal experiences of a close family member are used to counterpose the presumably objective study made by outside 'experts'. While Hasina's letters are truthful and unmediated accounts from an insider, the survey is conducted by 'professors' whose methodology cannot reflect what really happens to the people. Nazneen's invalidation of the information provided by an institution like LSE, coincidentally Kabeer's alma mater and current institution, can be seen as the novel's criticism of general observation made by metropolitan academics who seem to be unable to grasp the truth about individuals, especially women in deprived conditions. While the possibility of academic fallacy should definitely be born in mind, the novel's distortion of Kabeer's study may as well be understood in terms of Ali's attempt to provide an alternative view of the subject while being consistent with the novel's presentation of London as an ideal space for self-empowerment. For Nazneen, who has accidentally escaped to the 'better' world, it seems impossible for a woman in Dhaka to be able to empower herself like she can. Arguably, this perspective suggests the belief that there is one universal way of fighting against gender oppression which could only be done in the context of a well-developed capitalist society. Nazneen appears to embody a liberal feminist ideal, whose standard of progress could apparently be applied to the women around the world

regardless of their different conditions in each particular context. In other words, the narrative point of view could be said to align with the feminist readers who consciously support a certain form of gender equality rather than the female Bangladeshis, even though the story is told through the point of view of Nazneen, a female member of the minority community. Therefore, while it is possible to read *Brick Lane* as an inspirational story for women subjected to social conventions, whether or not it really speaks *to* or *for* the demographic that the protagonist seems to represent remains questionable.

As we can see, there are a lot of contradictions both within the text itself and in the arguments against and for the text made by several agents involved in its publication's controversies. What can be derived is that both the imagined and the actual readers of the novel are by no means homogenous, and the disagreements tend to come from different interpretive communities rather than among the same group. In his discussion on the problematic relationship between *Brick Lane* and capitalism, Garrett Ziegler also provides a critical perspective on its supposed biggest group of readers. He argues that the way the novel presents the struggle of transnational immigrants reflects 'the way this struggle is being understood and represented by people alienated from it'. Considering London as a global city that facilitates Nazneen's transformation through her participation in its 'consumer economy', he identifies the book's readership as 'an educated audience, one far removed from the lives of the characters with whom they are asked to sympathize'.²²² This group of readers are the real 'beneficiaries of the world system' in which the immigrants are fighting to survive under their detached observation. Witnessing Nazneen's success story, these readers are reassured that, with the help of capitalism, the immigrant women would finally become incorporated into the liberal metropolis and gain a better life by themselves. As Ziegler puts it:

According to the narrative, capitalist commerce will provide them with the tools of their own liberation, with the means of becoming citizens in the more desirable liberal community, if only they will reconfigure their identities enough to recognize the opportunity they have.²²³

This kind of reassurance might explain the novel's immense sales in the metropolitan markets to some extent.

John Marx, who uses a sociological approach to look at the novel, appears to have in mind a similar group of readers that Ziegler identifies. However, instead of criticising their ideological stance, he calls for what could be considered a responsible reading. Marx

²²² Ziegler, 'East of the City', p. 149.

²²³ Ziegler, p. 162.

purposes that the book presents a problem about the struggle of women in particular circumstances that ‘encourage self-reflexivity on the part of its readers’. ‘We’, he addresses the readers of the novel:

are asked not to believe in what we read so much as to entertain questions about it, to consider, for instance, what it means for women to behave as decision makers in contexts that seem too constrained to afford meaningful, much less rational, choice.²²⁴

Although Marx focuses on the gender aspect of the problem rather than class, he also considers *Brick Lane*’s readers as the educated middle-class in metropolitan cities that have no direct connection to the migrant characters. The only difference is that they are not seen as careless tourists but thoughtful observers with a certain amount of sociological knowledge. Yet illuminating as both Ziegler and Marx’s analyses are, they do not account for the group of readers that Ali refers to when defending her work against its critics: people of Bangladeshi descent, especially young women, around the globe. Neither do Ziegler and Marx recognise the ‘non-readers’ as parts of *Brick Lane*’s interpretive communities. In other words, they are explaining how the narrative works or should work with the majority readers, but not how it could affect the minority or unrecognised readers.

I would argue then that a key reason for the novel’s success in the market is its capacity to positively resonate with both the readers in a position of power and those outside it; it can be *representational* for the former and *inspirational* (albeit under predetermined conditions) for the latter. White middle-class Britons, for example, may be able to see Nazneen’s empowerment as realistic and possible due to their liberal outlook and personal experiences of economic security. Female immigrants in the UK and probably elsewhere, on the other hand, could aspire to be like Nazneen at a certain point in their lives if they follow in her footsteps and are lucky enough. Marketed this way, evidently, the book cannot avoid being read within the politics of representation. It portrays a world-system that different demographics of readers could imagine as ‘real’ and identify with in different ways. However, Sylheti men in London who can neither feel accurately represented nor be inspired by the novel could only become non-readers. They apparently cannot align their perspective with its intended readership.

I contend that their ‘misreading’ should not be seen simply as an act of violence against aesthetic freedom. Ahmed considers the reception of the Bangladeshis who live

²²⁴ John Marx, ‘The Feminization of Globalization’, *Cultural Critique*, 63.1 (2006), 1-32 (p. 22).

in the area around Brick Lane (the street) makes visible the ‘the social contradictions that are repressed in *Brick Lane* (the novel)’.²²⁵ I would further argue that this opposition to the book needs to be understood as an indication of the friction within the seemingly smooth narrative that forcefully puts the unintended readers in a dilemma; either they accept that they are to blame for their own failure to develop, both culturally and economically, or they become ill-informed, narrow-minded non-readers. The same could be applied to *Brick Lane*’s global readers at the peripheral sites of reception. While it is certainly possible that they take a touristic position made available by the narrative to observe the fictional characters with vicarious sense of privilege, they might as well identify with the underprivileged characters. In both cases, they could be inspired by the capitalist ideals at the metropole that salvage Nazneen, and even take Chanu’s failure as a cautionary tale. This means that, if anyone fails to achieve their goals in this liberal world, they have only themselves to blame. This narrative formation affects the way in which a peripheral reader places herself in the world-system, and that is why it is necessary to challenge it, not by ‘not reading’ it but by recovering the voices and perspectives that are eclipsed by the protagonist’s limited viewpoint. They are valuable evidence of the problematic logic of capitalism that the book itself sets up.

Against the narrative of progress: Reading *Brick Lane* from the peripheries

As we can see, *Brick Lane* is highly centralised, both in terms of its celebration of multicultural and liberal London and its alignment with the perspective of the metropolitan middle-class readers. At the same time, it is a product *from* the literary core *about* the economic peripheries that *sells* worldwide. Working as part of the mechanism that maintains unequal structures in this global capitalist world, it is somehow ‘universal’. The narrative voice, presented in the *Bildungsroman* form, generates an ideological perspective that blinds the readers to other important issues raised by the novel itself. However, the voices of the characters whose problems are simply exploited to support the protagonist’s liberation could alternatively help to foreground the neglected perspectives. Together they constitute an important point of departure for the development of a reading from the periphery that could challenge the narrative’s ideological propagation. In doing so, we need to resist the framework of *Bildungsroman* that prescribes the way the novel is read. Instead of focusing on Nazneen and her journey to success, we might turn attention to the obstacles of other characters that, earning

²²⁵ Ahmed, p. 29.

sympathy from Nazneen and the readers or not, are left unsolved after her goal is achieved. In other words, from the dispositions outside the centre of the plot, we can alternatively question rather than align with the celebratory perspective of the white middle-class readers, and make recognisable the problems that have not only not been solved, but often made worse, by the capitalism that the narrative endorses.

As I have discussed earlier, Nazneen is not just a guide who takes the tourists to sneak a peek at the closed Bangladeshi community in London. As a point of identification, she creates a narrative world through a combination of her perception of her experiences and her responses to other characters' voices. This world compresses together different times—her mother's time and the present day—and different places—Gouripur, Dhaka, and Tower Hamlets—into a coherent story about the lives of the Bangladeshi women in different locations. In accordance with Nazneen's journey from Gouripur, where she learns to be stoic and submissive, to Tower Hamlets, where she liberates herself, these locations appear to be landmarks of the linear timeline that account for her successful development, as well as signs of the failures of the other characters. In other words, Nazneen not only travels across places but also across time, from the ancient and backward epoch to modernity. This fact is emphasised by her own association of her experiences at home with premodern life when she first arrives in London, as previously illustrated.

Razia and Hasina, the two female characters who inspire Nazneen to stay in London, are two reference points at opposite ends of this metaphorical timeline. Razia epitomises a liberated life of a female immigrant in Britain. After her husband dies, she works industriously to earn for her children, and, despite her distress at discovering that her son is a drug addict, she manages to become an executive of the domestic garment business she builds together with other female members of the community. Inspiring Nazneen with her stories and experiences, she is also the person who makes Nazneen's liberation financially possible through her business skills. Undoubtedly, Razia is a feminist figure who fights bravely against social and physical limitations. Yet, as I have discussed earlier, Razia's success appears to rather be, at least partly, conditioned by the society in which she lives. When considered together with Hasina, this spatial precondition is even more clearly manifest. Though Hasina is as self-assertive as, if not more than, Razia, her life goes totally out of her control and she suffers endlessly. This different outcome of the same determination seems to suggest that what matters is not a person's will power, but the society's ability to make it realisable. Functionally, the contrast between Razia's and Hasina's fate underscores the difference between the two

places, the backward and oppressive Bangladesh and the progressive and liberal Britain, not the importance of a strong and assertive mind. For this reason, no one can help Hasina. Her life is already predetermined by the plot, and her only false is that she appears to be in the wrong setting.

Remarkably, the criteria for progressiveness in Nazeen's depicted world is the independence from patriarchal power. Nazneen's mother exists in the past, living a traditional and religious life in the patriarchal society that leads her to a tragic end. Nazneen, moving to metropolitan London, succeeds in liberating herself from both Chanu, the husband, and Karim, the secret lover. The condition that enables her to do so is the economic independence which is made possible by the British liberal values. However, Hasina's ambiguous position within this timeline reveals that the correlation between social and economic progress in Britain does not happen in the modernised area of Bangladesh. She is in Dhaka, a big, modernised city similar to London in its capitalistic approach, but she still suffers from patriarchal oppression like her mother in the rural village. Apparently, economic development there does not go together with the improvement of women's condition. Within this narrative of progress, Dhaka is portrayed as forward economically but backward culturally. Whatever the fact is, the implication for the reader is that the uneven development between Bangladesh and Britain results from Bangladesh's own inability to improve itself to reach the standard of the actual modern world, and thus its destruction of the life of its citizens.

In terms of gender equality, England is portrayed as a goal, a futuristic setting where Bangladesh has not yet arrived. However, if shifting attention from Nazneen to Chanu, another major character, we can see that democratic Britain is not a place for everyone. Years before Nazneen's story starts, Chanu follows his dream of what Nadia Valman calls the 'myth of immigrant self-betterment'.²²⁶ While the change of place, from the 'backward' Bangladesh to 'progressive' England, has a huge effect on Nazneen's life, Chanu's movement does not assist him to better himself. He spends decades trying to integrate but ends up retreating to his own home country without savings. England from Chanu's perspective is thus not an ideal place to pursue his dream or even to live. His declaration of disillusionment before going back to Bangladesh is noticeably associated with forward movement:

Every day of my life I have prepared for success, worked for it, waited for it, and you don't notice how the days pass until nearly a lifetime has finished. Then it hits you -- the thing you have been waiting for has already gone by. And it was

²²⁶ Valman, p. 3.

going in the other direction. It's like I've been waiting on the wrong side of the road for a bus that was already full. (p. 265)

According to Valman, gender is an important element that marks the differences between Chanu's and Nazneen's endings. In her comparative study of Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* and *Brick Lane*, she argues that both novels present women as 'less invested than men in myths of success, sentimental nostalgia or displays of power' and hence 'more adaptable and resourceful'.²²⁷ Admittedly, Nazneen's aim is a lot more modest than Chanu's and Karim's. While they are concerned about racism and career opportunities, Nazneen just wants to ice-skate. Their goals are presented as unrealistically ambitious and even aggressive. Seemingly, the possibilities of progress depend not only on the quality of the host but also on the quality of the residents, which can be deduced from Nazneen's characteristics. She is unaffected by masculine, egoistic impulses that her male counterparts have. Other than that, she is able to create her own economic values for the host society that operates by capitalist logic, and thus gain her membership. As a garment worker, Nazneen produces economic goods; more importantly, as a female member of the ethnic community dominated by patriarchy, she becomes a perfect spokesperson for the multicultural, democratic Britain that rescues her from oppressive conditions. Arguably, Nazneen's development does not change her social condition, but her social condition is instrumental in her achievement of a moderate level of success that is not open to Chanu and Karim. She is doing the job that suits her position, transgressing the social norm of her old world, but actually defining the new world that she enters into.

Since Chanu's character and social ambition are not fit for this condition of membership, he is deemed unsuccessful. The same rule also applies to Karim, who is born in England and yet still fails to be assimilated. Although no one can actually locate him at the end of the novel, the speculation of his whereabouts reveals the only two possible consequences of his radicalisation: returning 'home' or joining the armed group. As Nazneen asks a former member of the Bengal Tigers about the group:

'It was disbanded. The Chairman went away.'

'Oh,' said Nazneen, looking down. 'Where did he go?'

'Karim? He went to Bangladesh.'

'I see. Yes.'

'Or he joined the caravan. That's what some people say.'

Nazneen had a vision: Karim in his jeans and white shirt, a thin gold chain at his neck and a bale of dresses over his shoulder; Karim in a mountain cave, surrounded by men in turbans wielding machine-guns.

²²⁷ Valman, p. 7.

‘But I think he went to Bangladesh.’

‘Yes,’ said Nazneen. (p. 409)

Notably, Nazneen’s ‘vision’ suggests that, for her, Karim is not supposed to get engaged in such a political activism in the first place. He is just an urban guy, born and raised in a capitalist society, and might not be able to fully commit to the cause even if he wants to. In other words, his political ambition does not fit his identity as a second-generation immigrant. Probably due to this misrecognition of himself, it seems reasonable for Nazneen that he is removed of his membership of the British society and ‘returned’ home, the country he has never been to.

It turns out that *Brick Lane*’s narrative of development that sets the British modern society as the terminal of a person’s journey undermines itself because it has to get rid of those who cannot meet the country’s requirements. Both Chanu who migrates there to find opportunities in life and Karim who is initially a British citizen are the unwanted, the abject that must be cast out from the narrative so as to make it seamless. In this light, the triumph of female characters obliterates the losses of male characters that are portrayed as pathetic and helpless. It is therefore understandable if the male members of the community that the book appears to represent feel uncomfortable with it. Yet, reading its characters as if they are direct representations of Bangladeshi people in London could be easily dismissed as misreading. It might be better to point out the irony within the capitalist narrative of self-betterment itself. From Nazneen’s experiences, it could be derived that, in such a liberal country, nothing can hold its citizens back and all one needs is hard work and determination. However, Chanu, the hardworking and probably most determined character, fails massively since he desires more than the society could allow. Even Karim, a competent part of the country’s garment workforce, becomes unwanted when the politicisation of his religious identity presents a conflict with the majority member of the society. Revealingly, personal liberation with the assistance of capitalism has little to do with social justice. Through Nazneen’s process of integration, the power dynamic between the majority, the white middle-class Britons, and the minority in the ethnic community, is secured, despite the appearance of the possibility of social mobility.

Nazneen’s success story can thus be read as a guide for a good immigrant. It details desirable behaviour and mindset that the host country prefers, while maintaining social and economic inequality in the name of liberalism. Although one might argue that *Brick Lane* is a feminist novel, so it is understandable to confine itself to gender issues, I see its limitation as an illusion of female empowerment that fails to realise the intersectionality of different forms of oppressions. Obscured by Nazneen’s struggle against patriarchal

domination in her community, her status as a female worker seems to be too readily celebrated. Setting gender liberation as a goal, the story preempts the discussion of labour exploitation, which may affect women even more severely than men. Seen from the point of view of a middle-class feminist, getting rid of men and starting her home business looks like a triumph; yet for a female labourer already struggling in the metropole, it can be seen as a naive or even utopian desire. Without enough social and financial capital, the story's end point may just be the beginning of Nazneen's endless struggles to support her family. Consequently, the separation of gender issues from other oppressive systems is not only problematic for other socially deprived demographics but also for the feminist cause itself. In this respect, not celebrating Nazneen's personal liberation is not equal to being hostile to female empowerment. For those who are not in the position of power, Nazneen's success could be seen as an illusion of freedom that justifies other kinds of exploitation and suppresses the voices of groups of people that the core does not recognise.

In order to critically challenge the ideological framework that the novel propagates, a peripheral reader needs to avoid the timeline of progress and look into the unequal dynamic between the core and the peripheries in the same world and at the same time. From this disposition, she can identify with different forms of marginality according to her own experiences in relation to particular dominant powers. Even though *Brick Lane*, which is narrated from the perspective of the core, cannot account for such inequality, it can be useful to look at the problematic elements that the text cannot resolve, such as the fates of female characters who are left in their home country and male characters who are forced to make their journey back to it. They could be seen as fractures within the myth of development that is retold by the novel from a seemingly peripheral perspective. As for the professional readers, the novel is a reminder of the deceptiveness of global cultural products that may obstruct a reader's insight into oppressive mechanisms that operate on herself and others. For that reason, it is necessary to be alert to ways in which these narratives, circulated worldwide from the centres of economic and political worlds, are received in the peripheral sites of reception. Through the discourse of liberalism that is taken as a signifier of progress, they can obscure subtler forms of oppression that readers at the peripheries could otherwise identify with in a totally different way from the readers at the core.

As my analyses in the four chapters reveal, the heterogeneous body of 'peripheral' readers of these South Asian British texts not only complicate the idea about the white metropolitan readership of postcolonial literature, but also undermine the local/global

division of these readers. Both the white working-class readers of *Anita and Me* and the male Sylhetis who protest against *Brick Lane*, while belonging to different ethnic communities, are from the local peripheries of Britain. At the same time, their peripheral positions could be comparable, albeit in different ways, to the readers at the global peripheries. The lay readers of *The Impressionist*, on the other hand, could be found anywhere in the world outside literary academia. However, their class positions and geographical locations could contribute to different degree of literary and cultural knowledge that determines their proximity to the professional readers at the literary metropolises. Attention to these peripheral readers, evidently, enhances the way in which we perceive the interpretive community of postcolonial literature. In the next chapter, I look at a specific site of reception that could be considered ‘peripheral’ in both political and literary terms. This case study of Thailand adds to the complexity of the category of postcolonial readership and poses a challenge to the reception studies in a global context.

Chapter Five

Reading Postcolonial Literature in the Peripheral site of reception:

A case of Thailand

In a lecture titled ‘What is Literature?’ at Thammasat University, Thailand, in 2016, David Damrosch gave suggestions to the audience, mostly literary academics, about how ‘local’ literatures that are not written in the ‘hegemonic languages’ could reach a global readership. It is a matter of promotion and production. Citing the cases of Hungarian and Danish literatures, he explained ways in which local scholars could ‘pick their favourite writers and promote them heavily on the world market’.²²⁸ Further, as an anthologist, Damrosch revealed his rationale for selection; If he was to put a Thai piece of writing into his anthology, he would make sure that ‘I can get this to a teacher who knows nothing about Thailand, that they can teach it to American students, and get them excited’. In other words, the chosen text needs to be ‘born translated’, having been ‘written for translation from the start’.²²⁹

Damrosch’s insight is certainly useful for a promoter of Thai literature. At the same time, it indicates subtle differences between the global literary marketplace and international literary academia. The former is driven by promotional schemes and requires active participation of agents in the field, including writers, critics, literary agents, as well as readers; the latter, by contrast, depends almost entirely on the authorities within its field, most of whom are working in metropolitan universities in the Global North. In addition, regarding the target readership, while a book in the global market may be aimed at reaching as many readers as possible through global ‘free’ circulation that is by no means free of constraints, the anthology of world literature, at least for Damrosch, is a product of the Anglophone literary academia that has American students as primary readers. Accompanied by ‘proper’ reading strategies that Damrosch demonstrated with references to his book, *How to Read World Literature* (2009), a regularly updated anthology potentially enhances the comparative literary studies as a discipline at the metropolises. This regime of knowledge in turn creates a disciplinary standard, according to which the literary departments of peripheral universities, such as Thammasat, could design their syllabi. Arguably, Anglophone literary academia is even more centralised

²²⁸ David Damrosch, ‘What is Literature?’, *Dept of English Language and Literature TU*, 6 March 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCqYIk0UaQ>> [accessed 1 August 2017].

²²⁹ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 3.

than the Anglophone literary market, and the studies of world literature by means of anthologising and comparing literary works from wider geographical origins appears to accentuate the uneven relations rather than lessening them.

In chapter 1-4, I draw attention to the perspectives of the local and global peripheries both *within* and *outside* the texts, and argue that academic readings at the literary centres, informed largely by postcolonial and postmodern theoretical frameworks, can overshadow such perspectives. In this chapter, I use Thailand as a case study to illustrate how the ideological and material conditions at the periphery contribute to the core-periphery disparity in the field of literary studies in general and postcolonial studies in particular. More broadly, I illustrate two related points that form key assumptions of my thesis: first, that understanding the site of reception at the periphery is as crucial for an investigation into an unequal world literary system as studying the site of production; second, if the actual 'global' readers are to become a possible category at all, a contextualised reading approach that pays attention to the particularities of both the producing and the receiving ends is needed. Therefore, my discussion here works in an opposite direction to the previous chapters. It moves away from textual and extratextual analyses to an overview of a specific site of reception. That is to say, it shifts attention from the elements of the texts to those of the readers, attempting to account for factors that shape a particular reading community.

Since my focus is the reception of postcolonial literature in the classroom context, I will pay more attention to the literary academic sphere than to the marketplace, and provide some pedagogical possibilities that place emphasis on the peripheral site of reception as an alternative to Damroschian world literature studies. While postcolonial texts could be treated as tools to understand particular instances of unequal relations in the world-system, I maintain that these works could take on a different significance when viewed from the peripheries. Having peripheral perspectives in mind, I therefore consider postcolonial literary works as mediators between people at different peripheral locations, whose experiences could potentially be shared through the engagement with the texts. In other words, rather than seeing how postcolonial writers articulate the particularities of global unevenness, I seek to imagine an alternative way in which peripheral readers could relate themselves to the literary expressions of such worldwide phenomena of class, race, and gender inequality.

To locate Thailand into the global literary context, I start with an overview of the Thai literary marketplace and the status of postcolonial literature within it. Additionally, I discuss Thailand's historical condition that renders it almost invisible on the global

literary map in general and in the postcolonial literary field in particular. Regarding the Thai readers, I outline the socio-ideological development of the middle-class Thais, who arguably comprise the country's reading class. The trained readers of English-language literature, however, are also conditioned by the Thai academic context. My brief description of Thai literary academia attempts to provide the basis on which the reading of *The Buddha of Suburbia* in the classroom is analysed. The report on the observation will finally be followed by my proposal of some contextualised ways in which the four novels under study in this thesis could be read in this peripheral site of reception.

Thailand's literary location in the (postcolonial) literary world

Thanks to economic and technological advancement, Thais as members of the global community have been able to keep up with global trends through digital media and, for a particular social class, purchasing power. In terms of literary consumption, today readers appear to have more options than they did 50 years ago, when the country first underwent the process of 'development' as a result of the governmental policy supported by the US as part of its anti-Communist project.²³⁰ There are local conglomerates and independent publishers translating books from around the world into Thai. Such literary sensations as the *Harry Potter* series, *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *IQ84* are translated very quickly, and barely need advertising campaigns in order to sell. Alongside these texts, though each in significantly smaller quantities, are the Thai translations of the classics that appear in major 'best books' lists, from the English *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to the American *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and the Italian *The Name of the Rose* (1980). For those who read in English, both international bookstore chains and second-hand bookshops are available, and it is very convenient for them to browse through the Amazon catalogue and order online.

Within this field of available texts, there are not many works that could be put in the academic category of 'postcolonial'. There are quite a few novels by, for example, Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie in English-language bookstore chains and second-hand bookshops, yet almost none of them have been translated into Thai. When I asked the purchaser for *Asia Books*, Thailand's largest English bookstore chain, about the undersupply of 'postcolonial' literature, she asked me why I was interested in such an unpopular category.²³¹ Apart from the postcolonial literary giants, which include the two

²³⁰ see Benedict Anderson, 'Introduction', in *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, ed. by Benedict Anderson, trans. by Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985), pp 9–87.

²³¹ This interview was conducted on 8 May 2015, during my fieldwork in Thailand.

names mentioned above and figures like V. S. Naipaul, some authors who might not be that ‘big’ but are famous in a global scale also occupy a couple of shelves collectively in Kinokuniya, a Japanese bookstore chain that is known to be very diverse in selection.²³² As for the second-hand shops, the selection depends on past sale statistics as well as the availability of the used books that individual readers and some other undisclosed sources offer to the owners.²³³ Consequently, the books that have a record of being bought will almost always be on sale, while those that are unknown to the owners and regular customers are only available by chance. For example, an English traveller might bring a copy of Syal’s *Anita and Me* with her on holiday in Bangkok, and then after finishing it decide to sell it to a bookshop on the Khao San Road.²³⁴

Due to the market conditions outlined above, the four novels under study in this thesis are not equally available to their potential readers in Thailand. Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* can be found more easily in bookshops that sell new books, while both new and used copies of Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* are quite abundant. Understandably, even though both authors are quite well-known internationally, Ali’s book, with its exotic mode of presentation more appealing to tourist readers, could possibly be circulated among general readers in the global market more than *The Buddha of Suburbia* is. Kureishi, on the other hand, is more established in academia, so his book is likely to be available in international bookshops frequently visited by students and academics though it does not sell as well. Hari Kunzru’s status, however, is quite different. Since he is famous for his later books such as *Transmission* (2005) and *Gods Without Men* (2011), *The Impressionist* is rarely available, and not many people have the title in mind when talking about the author. Meera Syal is the least known in Thailand. The chance to find her books, both used and new, is quite rare, and her name does not ring a bell for most Thai readers, general or professional. The case of *Anita and Me*, therefore, is particularly interesting, since the fact that it is well-received locally, that is in England, does not automatically make it successful in the international market, and, without vigorous global circulation, it seems impossible for the book to reach a peripheral readership.

²³² It has only three branches in Thailand, all of which are in central Bangkok. However, according to a staff in EmQuartier Store I interviewed, this is the reason why it could afford to have a wide selection. Since each branch is quite big, it allows the company’s purchaser to experiment on new and unknown books while still having spaces for the titles that guarantee sales.

²³³ According to my interviews with shop owners at Khao San Road (1/05/2015), where European tourists flock, and Sukhumvit (8/5/2015), a popular residential area for expatriates. Both of them are in close proximity to leading Thai universities.

The lack of interest in specific issues of colonial and postcolonial experiences in Thailand seems to reasonably reflect the logic of the global marketplace, in which the peripheral sites of reception comply with the trends at the centres.²³⁵ However, the historical condition of Thailand's literary field also plays a significant role in the unpopularity of postcolonial literature, especially works from second-generation immigrants, among Thai readers. Already waning nowadays, the cultural atmosphere of celebratory multiculturalism in the 1990s that led to the immense popularity of novels about or from the previously underrepresented ethnic minorities in England has never reached Thailand. In the light of the scarcity of postcolonial writings both in translation and in English as outlined above, it could be surmised that such issues as migration, cultural displacement and multiculturalism are not priorities either in the Thai publishing industry or for general readers. Obviously, it is not that Thailand has never experienced clashes between ethnic and cultural differences. Many members of the Thai middle-class are descendants of Chinese diasporas, and most people are in contact with economic migrants, especially from the neighbouring countries, on a daily basis. I would argue that the official history of Thailand's 'independence' makes the country a particular (though not unique) case of social and literary insensibility. On one hand, unlike other peripheral countries that were colonised and thus considered as constituent parts of the world (Eurocentric) history, Thailand barely has a sense of historical connection to European imperialism that enables it to relate to others in the global literary field. On the other hand, socio-ideological assumptions about Thailand as the only country in the region that avoided European colonisation, which are both the cause and the effect of the persistent dominance of royal-nationalism²³⁶, together with the political atmosphere under periodic military dictatorship throughout its unfinished process of democratisation since the 1932 Siamese Revolution, render the country secluded and self-obsessed in terms of its literary and cultural engagement with the outside, 'postcolonial' world.

As a buffer zone at the end of the 19th century when England and France were fighting over the territories in the Southeast Asian region (as well as during the Cold War when America was battling against the spread of Communism from China to Southeast Asia), Thailand occupies a strategic position that has allowed it to maintain an

²³⁵ By 'centres' I mean the big, well-established, international book markets, such as London and Frankfurt Book Fair, where literary agents from *around* the world (which is not equal to *every country* in the world) come to meet and make business deals with each other.

²³⁶ According to Thongchai Winichakul who coined the term, it means 'nationalism with the monarchy and the royalist rulers of the old regime as leaders'. See Thongchai Winichakul, 'Modern Historiography in Southeast Asia: The Case of Thailand's Royal-Nationalist History' in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, ed. by Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 257-68 (p. 266).

‘independent’ status.²³⁷ The fact that, technically, it has never been colonised makes its citizens exceptionally proud, and they distinguish themselves from other neighbouring countries that have suffered the history of colonialism. According to the dominant Thai narrative, the ruling class’s several strategic moves, including the attempts to civilise or ‘modernise’ Siam, successfully prevented the country from being colonised during the global expansion of European imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century.²³⁸ This discourse is a derivative of the larger trope of ‘Siam’s enduring struggles for independence’, which plays a key role in the royal-nationalist construction of Thai identity as generally accepted by Thais in the present day.²³⁹ This narrative holds that Thai monarchs always managed to salvage the country and its people from the ordeal, and, in the face of colonialism, the kingdom was the only territory in the region that was not defeated by the West.

This official history of Thailand’s independence has already been demystified by historians and political scientists. As Dipesh Chakrabarty spells out in his foreword to *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (2010), ‘the fact that Thailand was never formally colonized did not ever stop the country from being constrained by Western imperial powers—mainly British and French—in ways reminiscent of what colonized nations suffered’.²⁴⁰ Michael Herzfeld names this ambiguous situation crypto-colonialism²⁴¹, while Peter A. Jackson, in his attempt to ‘open a dialogue with postcolonial studies while recognizing the ambiguities of Western power in the Thai context,’ calls it Semicolonialism.²⁴² In other words, Thailand has gone through some form of colonialism, the cultural implications of which I will discuss later in this chapter, without officially acknowledging it. It could be said, therefore, that if the country is indeed ‘exceptional’ among other South East Asian countries as its citizens may like to believe, it is not because it has never been colonised, but because, in this kingdom, there has never been an actual decolonising process in spite of the prevalent nationalistic mentality.

²³⁷ Thongchai Winichakul, ‘The Quest for “Siwilai”’: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 59.3 (2000), 528-49 (p. 538).

²³⁸ Thongchai, ‘The Quest for “Siwilai”’, p. 532.

²³⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, ‘Modern Historiography in Southeast Asia’, p. 262.

²⁴⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Foreword: The Names and Repetitions of Postcolonial History’, in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, ed. by Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), pp. vii-xvii (p. ix).

²⁴¹ Michael Herzfeld, ‘The Absence Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism,’ *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.4 (2002), 899-926.

²⁴² Peter Jackson, ‘The Ambiguities of Semicolonial Power in Thailand’ in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*, pp. 37-56 (p. 39).

The fact that no imperial country nominally laid claim on Siam results not only in the dominance of the discourse of independence, but also the ways in which Thailand is placed, and places itself, within the map of the postcolonial literary world. Because of the European global-scale colonisation and its aftermath, the history and the current situations of the previous colonies around the world are unavoidably intertwined with their ex-colonisers, and vice versa. Within the field of postcolonial literary studies, writings from, for example, India and Nigeria, especially those written in English, have been recognised and studied by postcolonial academics at the Anglophone metropolises. Also, due largely to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), canonical works produced at the literary centres have also been subjected to both theoretical and literary scrutiny in terms of their prejudice against racial others and its ideological impact upon readers. This critical examination is done not only by postcolonial academics but also, even more crucially, by writers from formerly colonised countries. Prime examples are Chinua Achebe's critique of the representation of Africa in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*²⁴³ and Jean Rhys's reinterpretation of the mad woman in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.²⁴⁴ The worlds of the colonisers and the colonised are connected through a body of contested narratives that have created a discursive field in which 'postcolonial' agents from both sides of the power structure interact.

Reasonably, Thailand's semicolonial position, with its official history of independence that many of its citizens pride themselves upon, may not be immediately recognised by either the agents in the postcolonial literary field or the Thais. While José Rizal, a Filipino author and national hero, published *Noli Me Tángere*, exposing the cruelty of the Spanish government, in 1887, Thailand had its first novel, a translation of Marie Corelli's *Vendetta!; or, The Story of One Forgotten*, in 1902.²⁴⁵ That is to say, by the time the country in the same region had been exhausted by imperialism and already started fighting back, Thailand was just introduced to the west's modern literary form by the Thai elite, the early group of people who temporarily 'migrated to the North' during the late nineteenth century.²⁴⁶ In a hundred years of the appropriation of western literature, few literary and scholarly works dealing with postcolonial issues have been produced and consumed within the Thai literary field. They are apparently not the topics

²⁴³ Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', *The Massachusetts Review*, 57.1 (2016), 14-27.

²⁴⁴ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966).

²⁴⁵ *Vendetta!; or, The Story of One Forgotten* is a novel by Marie Corelli (1855-1924), a successful British author well known for her melodramatic style. It was originally written in 1886 and was adapted into a film in 1915.

²⁴⁶ with reference to Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. by Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1969) that revolves around a Sudanese man who receives education in England.

of general interest. At the same time, not much has been said about Thailand by the writers at the metropolises. In most cases, the country and the people are exoticised, but not in a remarkably different way from other third-world countries.²⁴⁷ In other words, within the field of postcolonial literary studies, Thailand occupies a very small peripheral space, if not totally invisible. In spite of the fact that postcolonial studies nominally focuses on marginalised groups of people and experiences of those in the global peripheries, Thailand, which is obviously a peripheral country, has rarely been considered by postcolonial literary academics as a particularly interesting site of study. Its relative invisibility in the field, therefore, renders visible the coloniser/colonised binarism in postcolonial literary studies. Thailand with its history of ‘independence’ cannot be easily put into existing categories within the discipline, and Thai people, living under the grand narrative of ‘the land of the free’, the literal meaning of ‘Thailand’, do not recognise the relevance of the subject to their society.

Apart from the historical disconnection from most parts of the world where actual colonisation took place, the language boundary also hinders Thailand’s involvement in the global literary field. Having their own national language, Thai writers do not anticipate international readership, and write mainly in Thai for their local readers. As a result, except for academics working in area studies²⁴⁸, literature originating in Thailand is almost unheard of outside the country, let alone seriously studied. By the same token, the majority of Thai readers read only in Thai, so they have to depend on publishers’ selections of foreign literature. However, as Prabda Yoon, a writer and translator who also owns a small publishing house, pointed out at the London Book Fair 2016, ‘there is little interest in Thailand to read books from other cultures other than the big bestsellers from the UK, the US and possibly from Japan’.²⁴⁹ Publishers are understandably careful about purchasing rights and translating books for such a small group of potential customers. As a result, the chance that Thai general readers would have access to a wide variety of books beyond the market constraint is slim. Under this condition, it is not surprising that Thai readers are not target readers of international publishers and are not recognised by the literary writers and academics outside Thailand. Their opportunities to read books in translation is mostly up to the global market mechanism that has sweeping

²⁴⁷ Two most famous examples of literary exoticisation of Thailand are Margaret Landon’s *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944) and Alex Garland’s *The Beach* (1996).

²⁴⁸ Apart from the above-mentioned academics, Scot Barmé is another historian specialised in Thai history. These scholars are based in the UK, the US and Australia.

²⁴⁹ Olivia Snaije, ‘India, Thailand, Turkey: Challenging Centers of Publishing in a Postcolonial World’, *Publishing Perspectives*, 19 April 2016 <<http://publishingperspectives.com/2016/04/publishing-postcolonial-world/#.WDXGSaKLTq2>> [accessed 30 August 2017].

effects worldwide, with a few exceptions of the works whose symbolic capital exceeds the publishing cost. Outside the market, the Thai literary field, as both the production and reception sites, is excluded from that world.

Nonetheless, western (mainly English) literature, imported and adapted by the Thai royal elite at the dawn of the 20th century²⁵⁰, plays an important part in the development of both the Thai reading culture and the nationwide assumptions about 'civilisation'. Although the majority of Thai readers are not fully exposed to western literary world due chiefly to the language barrier, they certainly have access to a body of translated works. Historically, the aristocrats, the privileged few who were educated in Europe, were responsible for these cultural transmissions. A brief summary of Thai readers' literary appetites since the introduction of western literature reveals the cultural and ideological implications the early imported texts had upon the general public. This insight could also give light to Thai readers' assumptions about the relationship between Thai and western literature today.

The paradox of the cultural impact of western (English) literature

In 'From Mr. Jungle to Mr. City', an elementary school text used during the reign of King Rama VI, an orphan boy from the jungle travels to Bangkok to stay with his uncle. Added to the uncle's household registration, the boy, whose original name is Thuan (Jungle), is renamed Muang (City). The uncle, a bureaucrat who used to work in the West, trains him to become 'civilised' and at the same time loyal to the country. Muang finally becomes a policeman, a good subject working in the name of the kingdom.²⁵¹

Adapted from the play called 'Good Citizen' written in 1916 by a member of the royal family, the text was a combination of colonial discourse of civilisation and royal-nationalistic instruction. The protagonist was reminiscent of Dickensian characters in the *Bildungsroman* tradition. In order to become a rightful citizen, he needs to leave his uncivilised home (jungle), kill his uncivilised self (Thuan) and abide by the rules of the city (Bangkok), which is the centre of political, economic and cultural powers, a local version of European imperialism. The text, therefore, could be seen as an instance of Siam/Thailand's ideological apparatus that is disseminated through the educational system to facilitate its centralising process. The story's striking similarity to the colonial

²⁵⁰ Thosaeng Chaochuti, 'Through the Literary Lens: Vajiravudh's Writings and Siam's Negotiations with the Imperial West,' in *Disturbing Conventions: Decentering Thai Literary Cultures*, ed. by Rachel V. Harrison (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) pp. 63-78 (p. 63).

²⁵¹ Thongchai, 'The Quest for "Siwilai"', p. 546. The title 'From Mr. Jungle to Mr. City' is also his translation.

trope of self-development and its endorsement of western civilisation also reveal the ambivalent relationship that Thais, particularly the ruling class, had with the West. While it is a matter of national pride that the country has never been militarily forced to accept any form of foreign culture, western social and cultural values were nonetheless imposed on Thai people by the Thai elite, the royals and noblemen who saw the western concept of ‘civilisation’ as the ‘ethos’ of ‘a new world order in which Europe was at its zenith’.²⁵²

According to Thongchai Winichakul, there are two ways in which the Kingdom of Thailand proved itself, in its people’s eyes if not in the European empire’s eyes, as a civilised country: imitating the West and creating civilisational others within and along the borders of the country—*chaopa* and *chaobannok*—through various kinds of cultural production, especially travel writing.²⁵³ Literally translated, *chaopa* are people in the jungle, while *chaobannok* are people in rural areas. The former are barbaric and uncivilisable; the latter, backward but capable of being civilised by means of education.²⁵⁴ In other words, the ruling class imposed on themselves the civilising mission, which is, by implication, the duty of the morally superior. Thus, although royal-nationalism is based upon the monarchs’ ability to safeguard the country from foreign invasions, western colonialism, as Rachel Harrison points out, ‘functioned less as a threat of extinction to Siamese ruling power than as an inspiration in terms of modes of control’.²⁵⁵ Interestingly, King Rama VI, a Thai monarch who was also a prolific writer, wrote a collection of detective stories that were clearly inspired by works of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In a story that is modelled on Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the murderer turns out to be an orangutan, whom the narrator calls ‘*khonpa*’ (a variation of *chaopa*).²⁵⁶ According to Harrison and Thosaeng Chaochuti, the monarch (then the prince) used a detective to represent himself as having an authority over the uncivilisable Other and ‘radically different from it’.²⁵⁷ The legacy of the Thai ruling class’s colonial mentality could nowadays be perceived in the outlook of Thai people, especially the urban middle-class, whose social position allows them to associate themselves more closely with the elite than with the *chaopa/chaobannok*.

²⁵² Thongchai, ‘The Quest for “Siwilai”’, p. 529.

²⁵³ See Thongchai, ‘The Quest for “Siwilai”’; Thosaeng, ‘Through the Literary Lens’; and Natthanai Prasannam, ‘วรรณคดีมรดกของไทย: การอ่านใหม่ด้วยแนวคิดหลังอาณานิคม’ (Thai Classical Literature: A Postcolonial Revisit), *Journal of Mekong Societies*, 3.2 (2007), 91-108.

²⁵⁴ It should be noted that the two categories sometimes overlap. Mr. Jungle, with the help of this uncle, finally proves to be civilisable.

²⁵⁵ Rachel V. Harrison, ‘Introduction: Theoretical F(r)ictions: Cultures of Criticism, Modes of Colonialism and Thai Literary Studies’, in *Disturbing Conventions*, pp. 1-33 (p. 11).

²⁵⁶ Thosaeng, p. 67.

²⁵⁷ Thosaeng, p. 68.

The literary appetite in Siam's popular culture in the early twentieth century, remarkably, coincided with the ruling elite's colonialist worldview. After the commercial failure of *Khwam Mai Phayabat* (1915), reportedly Thailand's first novel written in response to the aforementioned novel by Corelli²⁵⁸, the author, Khru Liam, had to write another novel that was more 'foreign' to compensate for the earlier loss. The book is called *Nang Neramid* (1916), which has strong similarities to Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), the imperialist novel that he also translated.²⁵⁹ Its protagonist is an English Oxford graduate whose Egyptian father owns a small museum of Egyptian antiquities. He goes on an expedition to Cairo, gets involved in a love triangle, meets female mummies created by the Arabs, has an African servant, and joins a sorcerous sect that uses the Quran.²⁶⁰ It appeared that Thai readers at that time²⁶¹ were more likely to be attracted by foreign characters and faraway settings reminiscent of the Orientalist tropes than by stories about people and places they were familiar with.²⁶² In addition, these readers may have internalised stereotypical ideas about the racial 'others' from the European characters whose points of view the literature in circulation asked them to identify with. This cross-cultural identification could be attributed to the narrative mechanism that invites the readers to see the world through the white male protagonist's eye, as much as the readers' assumption about their place in the world. Arguably, Thai readers were able to see themselves as 'equal' to the Europeans and superior to other ethnicities because they not only lived in an independent kingdom but also had their own colonies in the rural and mountainous areas.

²⁵⁸ Both the translator of *Vendetta* and the writer of *Khwam Mai Phayabat* had spent a certain period of their lives studying in England.

²⁵⁹ The Thai translation of *She* was first serialised, and then reprinted and retranslated in 1916, 1934, 1944, 1991 and 2004. *Nang Neramid*, by contrast, has never been reprinted. See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *อ่านจนแตก: วรรณกรรม ความทันสมัยและความเป็นไทย (Reading Thoroughly: Literature, Modernity and Thainess)* (Bangkok: Read Publishing, 2015), pp. 38-64.

²⁶⁰ see further in Thak Chaloemtiarana, 'Khru Liam's *Khwam Mai Phayabat* (1915) and the Problematics of Thai Modernity', *Southeast Asia Research Journal*, 17.3 (2009), 457-488 and 'Nang Neramid: Thepthida Egypt Ruang Phet lae Khwam Phoe fan khong Phuchai Nai Nawaniyai Thai Yuk Raek' *Ratthasatsan Journal*, 29.1 (2008), 1-37.

²⁶¹ It should be noted that, in this early period, the writers/translators and the readers of both translated works and novels originally written in Thai were mostly the educated upper-class and affluent bureaucrats. See Supanee Varatorn, *ประวัติการประพันธ์นวนิยายไทย: ตั้งแต่สมัยเริ่มแรกจนถึง พ.ศ. 2475 (History of the Thai Novel: From the Beginning to 1932)* (Bangkok: Chareonwit Printing, 1976), p.118.

²⁶² Thak claims that *Nang Neramid* 'pretends' to be 'farang', meaning that the author intentionally imitated the plot and writing style of the western (mainly English language) texts in order to deceive the readers into thinking that it was indeed written by a *Farang*, that is, a white (west European and North American) person. He also speculated that Khru Liam might have written several other novels that were mistaken as translations of English texts. (Thak, *Reading Thoroughly*, pp. 45-48).

As Chakrabarty vividly puts when he points out the similarity between modern Thailand and India, 'It was as though the *farang*²⁶³, more than the Indian or the Burmese or the Malay or the Chinese or the Cambodian or the Lao, was *the* Other against whom the modern person in Thailand defined or measured himself or herself'.²⁶⁴ Yet, the treatment of the *farang* as the model was historically mediated by the Thai elite, who in turn became the archetype of the good citizens who are supposed to be 'civilised' but not too 'westernised'. With 'civilised' leaders of their own, the Thai urban middle-class comprehend themselves as comparable to the Europeans, yet with the additional uniqueness of descent from an ancient kingdom. As Thongchai pointedly remarks:

We have little awareness of how the cultural profile, belief systems, ideas and peoples of Southeast Asia differ or share similarities with our own. It is a common discourse among Thais that Thailand can be likened to a precious jewel. It is unique and beyond comparison to anything else in the world, let alone its inferior neighbours'.²⁶⁵

It is not surprising, then, that the Thai reading class, mainly comprised of the middle-class who are usually well-educated and economically secure, is not familiar with history and culture of their neighbours, let alone the marginalised groups within the country. Colonial mentality is harmoniously integrated with royal-nationalism. In my observation of the classroom discussions of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, I bore in mind that it is against this backdrop of socio-ideological conditions of the Thai middle-class that the book is read. More importantly, the subtle influence of the internalised colonial mentality underscores the significance of postcolonial literature in Thailand's context; it not only allows Thai readers to connect to the outside world in a more critical way, but also has the potential to encourage self-reflections on Thailand as a country under internal colonialism. Through the engagement with the texts, the middle class's way of thinking about itself could be put into a new light and thus challenged.

Apart from the historical and cultural narratives that give shape to the attitudes of the Thai reading class, a look at the context of literary studies in Thailand is also crucial to understanding the reception of postcolonial literature in the classroom. Ongoing conditions within Thai academia including the study of Thai literature in isolation from the material world outside Thailand, the disciplinary division between Thai and foreign literary studies, and the English department's Eurocentric curriculum are contributing

²⁶³ See footnote 258.

²⁶⁴ Chakrabarty, p. ix.

²⁶⁵ Thongchai Winichakul, 'Foreword: Decentering Thai Studies,' in *Disturbing Conventions*, pp. xiii-xix (p. xiv).

factors in the peripherality of postcolonial literary studies in the country. More importantly, they mark the particularity of the Thai classroom as a peripheral site of reception itself.

The English Department in Thai literary academia

In the introduction of *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era* (1985), an anthology of Thai short stories edited and co-translated by Benedict Anderson, the late historian extensively outlines the historical and political contexts preceding and surrounding the short stories that were written in the 1970s, the decade that he calls the late American era. He discusses how Thai up-and-coming writers at that time responded to the effects of capitalist ‘modernisation’, introduced by the US as part of its political campaign against communist countries and embraced by the Thai military government as its justification to rule. Invaluable as a political and historical analysis, this introduction is also vitally important as literary criticism. Anderson looks at common themes of the selected works, along with the writers’ social background and their writing styles. The stories, according to Anderson, mainly feature self-reflexive contemplation on social changes and the writers’ own positions as beneficiaries of modernisation that corrupted the traditional society. Having had the opportunity to receive higher education and move to the capital, they left their home, family and friends, who suffered the consequence of deagriculturalisation and industrialisation.²⁶⁶

The writers’ attitudes towards their ambiguous position were varied, but all fell within the condition Anderson conceptualises as ‘double provincialism’.²⁶⁷ They were originally from outside Bangkok, the local centre of the Thai royal-nationalist empire, which made them ‘provincial’ in relation to the capital. When they finally arrived in the city, the elite had already gone to such centres of the world as England and America, leaving the middle-class writers doubly ‘provincialised’ as local migrants who could only afford to get to the provincial centre, not the global, metropolitan centres. Notably, this anxiety is starkly different from the experiences of the aristocrats who went to study in Europe in the late 19th century. The internal struggles that these ‘double-provincialised’ writers were facing are comparable to writers from the previously colonised countries who migrate to the metropolises. They experienced ‘modernity’ and ‘civilisation’ that were not theirs, at the expense of the physical and spiritual connection to their communities at home. This vantage point makes visible the parallel between global imperialism and

²⁶⁶ Anderson, *In the Mirror*, pp. 40-87.

²⁶⁷ Anderson, *In the Mirror*, p. 42.

Thailand as a highly centralised country. It could also encourage the readers to acknowledge the way in which literature from other peripheries articulates similar experiences, both in local and global scales, and engender reflection upon their own country as a crypto-colony with internal colonialism.

Anderson's chosen positioning as a Marxist, combined with his outsider's perspective, enables him to examine the expression of unequal relations in both local and global scales. His focus on the articulation of complicated and ironic effects of the American neo-colonial regime's invasion upon a peripheral, underdeveloped country is similar to the Warwick Research Collective's treatment of world literature as 'the literature of the world-system' in some significant respects.²⁶⁸ Firstly, he approaches Thai literature less as the product of Thai culture than as a result of external forces, namely the US military and economic intervention and, paradoxically, the anti-war movement of the 1960s. Secondly, his analytical framework brings about the insight, not of what Thailand uniquely *is* as literary tourists tend to prefer, but of how Thailand as a peripheral part of the world underwent the universal experiences of global capitalism in its own way. This viewpoint, I contend, is necessary for Thai readers in order to map themselves in the world of unequal relations, and identify with other peripheral locations, most of which have the history of colonisation, that Thais may not usually see as relevant to their own history.

However, *In the Mirror* has not been much recognised by Thai literary academics, either in Thai or English departments.²⁶⁹ This omission could be seen as a disciplinary gap that may also explain a particular way in which postcolonial literary criticism is adopted by Thai scholars. Apart from the language barrier, experts on Thai literature may find it difficult to locate Anderson's transnational approach in existing scholarly literature that usually periodises literary history according to the internal politics of Thailand. Thus while Anderson saw the twelve years (1967-1979) during which the stories in his collection were written as parts of the American era, Thai scholars place them within the two respective literary periods: 'meaning-seeking' (1964-1973) and 'literature for life' (1973-1976).²⁷⁰ The first witnessed an emergence of a new generation of writers who started questioning about their life and society, while the second one is renowned for its social engagement as opposed to the art-for-art's sake approach. The left-leaning

²⁶⁸ WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, p. 8.

²⁶⁹ Chusak Pattarakulvanit, 'ปรัศวกาศวิไลวรรณกรรมไทยสมัยใหม่ ในสายตาเบเนดิกต์ แอนเดอร์สัน' (Lateral Inversion of Modern Thai Literature in Benedict Anderson's Eyes) in *ในกระจก: วรรณกรรมและการเมืองสยามยุคอเมริกัน* (Thai edition of *In the Mirror*) (Bangkok: Read Publishing, 2010), pp. 315-344 (p. 318).

²⁷⁰ Chusak, p. 331.

energetic literary movement that played a significant role in political activities during the period was the Thai literary 'mainstream' until the 6 October 1976 massacre, the attack on student protesters by the Thai military, the police and far-right paramilitary groups.²⁷¹ Although both periods were indeed influenced by external cultural movements and global politics, Thai literary academics are mainly concerned with internal factors. This discrepancy between local and international perspectives that results in different methods of periodisation may be a reason why *In the Mirror* is almost completely excluded from Thai literary studies in Thailand, even though it has been used as a core text for Thai studies in universities in Europe and America for decades.²⁷² The Thai periodisation, remarkably, reflects the way in which Thai literature is considered separately from the external literary and political worlds, which might make it difficult for Thai readers, inside or outside academia, to associate them with writings from other parts of the world that are also affected by American-style modernisation.

In addition to self-obsession, Thai literary studies suffers from a general scepticism towards literary theory. Thai literature is inseparable from the monarchy whose active roles in literary production and 'quality control', especially during the reign of King Rama VI, marked it the guardian of Thai literary culture.²⁷³ The monarch himself was a prolific writer and the president of the Royal Society of Literature (RSL) that he established in 1914.²⁷⁴ Consequently, the accepted method of literary studies has conventionally been reading for appreciation, less of the work than of the authorial genius.²⁷⁵ Theoretical applications, arguably, cannot easily fit into this royal-nationalist regime of knowledge. As Harrison contends in her observation of Thai literary academia, 'the rejection of theory relates less to its origins in the Western academy and more to its potential—indeed, its duty—to unsettle and disrupt the status quo: in short, to disturb convention'.²⁷⁶ Together with the inward-looking tendency, this distrust of theory might not provide Thai literary critics with a fertile ground for engaging with postcolonial literary criticism. Even though nationalistic impulses may have driven some Thai academics to question western political and cultural hegemony like writers and thinkers in the former European colonies, what Harrison calls 'nativist theory' is more dominant

²⁷¹ Thanya Sangkhaphanthanon, *ปรากฏการณ์แห่งวรรณกรรม (Literary Phenomenon)* (Bangkok: Nakhon Publishing, 1995), p. 183.

²⁷² Chusak, p. 318.

²⁷³ Thanapol Limapichart, 'The Royal Society of Literature, or, the Birth of Modern Cultural Authority in Thailand', in *Disturbing Conventions*, pp. 37-62.

²⁷⁴ Thanapol, p. 37.

²⁷⁵ Thosaeng, p. 64.

²⁷⁶ Harrison, 'Introduction: Theoretical F(r)ictions', p. 23.

in Thai academy than postcolonial theory. This nativist approach assumes the monolithic authenticity of Thainess that ‘serves to confirm the conventional authority of internally colonising forms of power’.²⁷⁷

To illustrate her point, Harrison cites the work of Chetana Nagavajara, a western-educated (Cambridge and Tübingen) professor of German literature who is very influential in Thailand's literary academy. His writings include, for examples, ‘Literature in Thai Life: Reflections of a Native’ (1994) and ‘In Search of Indigenous Theories’ (2004). Chetana's attempt to construct uniquely ‘Thai’ literary theories due to his essentialist view of Thai identity marks an interesting case of the appropriation of postcolonial criticism in a peripheral country. I agree with Harrison that his return to nativism obstructs rather than facilitating fruitful applications of western theories that have the potential to ‘subvert the grip of elitist forms of cultural authority derived in turn from the adoption and imitation of Western colonial models by the Thai state’.²⁷⁸ Nonetheless, I believe Chetana's critical standpoint stems as much from his nationalist attitude as from his elitist worldview. Following his remark on Chit Phumisak's ‘tendentious’ Marxist reading of literature that was highly inspiring for students during the 1960s²⁷⁹, Chetana expressed this pedagogical concern: ‘The task of teachers of literature has certainly become more delicate as well as more challenging. It requires the highest degree of intellectual integrity to be able to turn facile pseudo-intellectual partisanship into humane literacy’.²⁸⁰ Literature, just like Thainess, should be free from contamination, not only by foreign hands but also by the unauthorised. If Chetana appoints himself as the guardian of Thai culture, his authority within literary academia makes him, and possibly others who have the same level of ‘intellectual integrity’, the centre for ‘humane literacy’ in Thailand. This position is curiously reminiscent of that of the Thai monarch who was the president of the RSL and the provider of guidelines for morally good and well-written books that deserved the institution's honour.²⁸¹ As discussed above, this kind of literary authority is not necessarily contradictory to the European empire. Chetana himself teaches German literature and is a polyglot. The fear that the authority of the literary experts is undermined is probably as strong as the concern

²⁷⁷ Harrison, p. 25.

²⁷⁸ Harrison, pp. 29-30.

²⁷⁹ Chit Phumisak (1930-1966) was a historian and a literary critic, whose anti-establishment stance caused controversies since he was an undergraduate at Chulalongkorn University, the most prestigious institution in Thailand. He joined the Communist Party of Thailand in 1965, and was reportedly shot dead in the following year.

²⁸⁰ Chetana Nagavajara, *Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1996), p. 10.

²⁸¹ Thanapol, pp. 45-46.

about Thai conventions being disturbed. The seemingly anti-colonial arguments in Thai literary academia are thus inseparable from an anxiety over the loss of the institutional power of the experts in the field.

Apart from the insularity of Thai literary studies, the department of English, as well as other western languages such as French and German which are less popular, is also responsible for the scarcity of contextualised and integrated literary theories in Thailand. Unlike those in the previous colonies, the English department in Thai universities has never been part of the colonial administration. While English studies appeared in the British Indian curriculum in the 1820s, even before it became a discipline in England²⁸², the oldest English department in Thailand was established in 1961.²⁸³ Therefore, it by no means preceded or replaced the Thai literary establishment, as it did in India or Kenya.²⁸⁴ In higher education, the two departments exist separately, and since they appear to have different disciplinary emphases, rarely cooperate. If the Thai department is self-obsessed with Thai language and literature, the English department is not so different in terms of its self-confinement within the studies of English language and, to a far lesser degree, Anglophone literature. Since the English department in most Thai universities provides skill-focused language training, English literary studies is already a marginalised area within the discipline. Thus, it cannot even compete with Thai studies for either cultural or ideological influence, even though the experts of western culture, which is tacitly accepted as ‘superior’, could be said to have a certain level of symbolic capital. In summary, English studies in Thailand is too insignificant to either question its own colonial legacy or threaten Thai cultural hegemony.

Referring to British and American modules as models for its curricula, the Thai version of the English department, most of whose faculty members are trained in the UK or the US, seems to exist in another social and cultural sphere. It indeed has a history of being the embodiment of Englishness. Chetana’s recollection of the educational atmosphere decades ago, though a personal observation, is worth considering:

The early generations of Thai teachers, highly-cultured Oxonians, were labouring under the illusion that English literature should be taught to Thai students in the same way as it is taught to native speakers. We must replicate the right

²⁸² Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of conquest: Literary study and British rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 3.

²⁸³ Anon., ‘Chulalongkorn University’, <<http://www.arts.chula.ac.th/06about/history1.html>> [1 August 2017].

²⁸⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, ‘On the Abolition of the English Department’, in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 438-42.

atmosphere. We must speak English in class; we must speak Oxford English and make our students speak Oxford English too.²⁸⁵

The appropriateness of the teaching method may be debatable, but what I would like to focus here is the positioning of the English department within the Thai academy which seems not to have any connection with the Thai social and historical context. Marginalised as it is, English literary studies appears to pursue its own small-scale colonial project that has very little effect on the society that is already ‘colonised’ by the ruling class.

Since English literature curricula in Thailand usually replicate UK and US syllabi, postcolonial literary studies could be added simply for pedagogical and intellectual reasons. This academic field has almost nothing to do with political movements or even daily life outside the classroom. As the American co-owner of Dasa, a second-hand bookshop at the heart of Bangkok, revealed in his interview with me, the so-called postcolonial novels such as Morrison’s *Beloved*, would occasionally sell well—which means 4-5 copies in a short time—when they had been assigned to university students.²⁸⁶ While the English department, with the language and literary expertise of the faculty, could potentially link Thailand as a peripheral country to the world outside it and postcolonial literary criticism could be a potent tool to realise this goal, the disciplinary limitations described above prevent it. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that most of the Thai academics that actively engage in the debates about the use of theory and the status of literary studies are from departments of foreign languages.²⁸⁷ Although it could be said to be a matter of personal inquisitiveness rather than disciplinary conditions, this form of cross-cultural engagement indicates the potential of academics in these departments to reach outside their disciplinary comfort zone, if they take the issue of academic isolation seriously.

From this vantage point, teaching postcolonial literature in class is particularly challenging for Thai English literary scholars. The pedagogical process needs to enable the students to relate to the outside postcolonial world from the peripheral position of the Thai university, and at the same time, evoke self-examination about the power relations within the country that mirrors the global-scale unequal system. The following analysis of my classroom observations substantiates the need to respond to this challenge.

²⁸⁵ Chetana, *Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective*, p. 12.

²⁸⁶ See footnote 229.

²⁸⁷ For examples, Chetana himself from German; Chusak Pattarakulvanit from English; Nopphorn Prachakul, who introduced the ‘Postcolonial School of Thoughts’ to Thailand, from French.

Thailand evidently belongs to the world's cultural, political and economic periphery. Yet, at this site of reception, the trained readers of English-language literature may identify more with the core, due to their social and cultural position within the national space. After discussing the students' responses to *The Buddha of Suburbia*, I demonstrate how the attention to the peripheral perspectives I called for in the previous chapters could help to develop an engaging localised reading in this particular academic context.

On observations: Contextualising the postcolonial reading in the Thai classroom

The English literature classroom is where royal-nationalist ideology, which affects the worldview of the Thai citizens and particularly the middle class, and the irrelevance of the discipline of English literature materialise. The clash between the local readers and the imported standard of the global (Anglophone) academia in the classroom context testifies to not only the (ambiguous) peripherality of Thailand as a reception site of postcolonial literature written in English, but also the limitations of postcolonial literary theory as a pedagogical framework. In the previous chapters, I have demonstrated how postcolonial concepts and theoretical discussions in academia could overshadow other issues of inequality in the novels. In the Thai classroom, this problem is even more pointed. The students would not find postcolonial problems experienced by people in faraway locations immediately relatable, and theoretical abstraction is unlikely to help them engage with such issues. Rather, the conceptual framework could make Thai students lose connections at the textual level, being unable to relate the stories to their status as residents of a semicolony and economic periphery. Thus, postcolonial literary criticism could be at most an intellectual exercise of the metropolitan academics transmitted to the classroom at the periphery, unless it is intersectionally contextualised into the site of reception.

My observations were conducted in the 2014-2015 academic year with the senior students of the department of English Language and Literature in Thammasat University, a nationally-leading institution in Bangkok and one of the few that award English literature degrees. They consisted of four sessions (1.5 hr each) of discussion of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, led by the lecturer, as parts of the fourth-year optional module 'Postcolonial Literature'. *The Buddha of Suburbia* is included in the syllabus for the first time, along with more canonical works such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). There were a total of 14 students in attendance and the majority of them (12) were female. However, male students were the most vocal, and one of them dominated all sessions. Since it was a small group, the class

format mainly featured group discussions with intermittent close readings. The lecturer was the centre of the class, raising notable issues and encouraging the students to talk.

The main objective of the observations was to understand the way in which the students engaged in the reading of the novel as a group activity. With that in mind, I noted how they related the particular parts of the book to their experiences, how they utilised their knowledge of postcolonial theory, and how they positioned themselves as readers of a postcolonial text. I did not have the criteria to determine the success or failure of the reading as such, but I did have a hypothesis that this reading from the periphery could offer some new perspectives on the novel. During the sessions, I sat at the back of the class to avoid distracting the students, and did not intervene in their conversations. Since they were informed by the lecturer in advance about the observation, their general behaviour, such as attentiveness and responsiveness, may or may not have been slightly altered. Yet, I hold that the changes did not affect the content of the discussions that I based my analysis on in any significant way. As for my position as an observer, since I had worked for this institution for 4 years, it is unavoidable that I have certain assumptions about the students here in general. The overview of Thai educational system as a whole is also partly informed by my own experiences as both a student and an academic. However, I have never been in contact with the students in the classroom under study, so I did not have any assumption about any of them as individuals.

Thammasat University's students could be considered 'well-educated' in the Thai sense of the word, which to some extent implies their class position and economic status. They have the academic achievements to gain admission into a highly competitive institution, but usually not without facilitators such as first-class schooling and costly private tutoring. Therefore, although they do not represent the majority of Thais regarding the level of education and ideological stances, they provide quite a faithful, albeit not thorough, glimpse into the Thai urban, middle-class demographics, whose socio-ideological background I have discussed earlier in this chapter. In brief, they occupy a dual position, being globally peripheral but locally central.

Despite their 'good' education, these students have certain limitations to their study of this module which could be both particular to Thais and shared by other peripheral countries. The first is their literary expertise. As discussed above, the Thai-style reading convention that Thai students are trained to follow since middle school makes it difficult for them to go beyond reading for appreciation. In fact, 'criticism' has always carried negative connotations, meaning 'to find faults', which means that it can

be carried out only by those with institutional authority.²⁸⁸ In addition, the fact that most Thais do not read in English and that foreign literature is not a required subject in most schools make Thai students almost oblivious to literature written outside the country, with a few exceptions of ‘classic’ children’s literature in translation. Consequently, even English literature students would not be familiar with western classics until they have studied their major subjects for quite a while.²⁸⁹ With markedly less practice and exposure to English and other western literatures, compared to students in the metropolises or previously colonised countries, they are less equipped with background knowledge necessary to grasp the significance of, to give only obvious examples, references to English literary canons and narrative conventions. It is not easy for them, thus, to detect counter-discursive voices when ‘the empire writes back’. In this following case of *The Buddha of Suburbia* readings, a student found the plot structure that might be seen by literary scholars as a technique of postcolonial *Bildungsroman* simply dull and inconclusive. Even though this same impression might also be felt by British students, the gap that the lecturer needs to fill in order to draw attention to the postcolonial writing strategies will be considerably less in the case of the students who are more familiar with the traditional European *Bildungsroman*.

Another limitation is Thai learning culture. Even though the ‘western’ concept of student-centric approach of education has long been recognised and enthusiastically endorsed by the country’s educational authorities, in practice, the teacher is still considered by the students, and sometimes considers her/himself, as the only reliable source of knowledge, and thus is granted supreme authority in the classroom.²⁹⁰ Chetana’s concern about pseudo-intellectuals discussed earlier bespeaks this prevailing attitude. Only academics who are ‘properly’ trained and authorised by educational institutions can know what is right, wrong or worthy of consideration. Additionally, the class format in the secondary level is usually lecture-only, so the students are more used to listening and memorising than voicing their opinions. The university lecturers, who are specialists in their disciplines but have rarely been trained to develop effective strategies to break this

²⁸⁸ Krasae Malayaporn, *วรรณกรรมไทยปัจจุบัน (Contemporary Thai Literature)* (Bangkok: Odeon Store, 1987), pp. 8-9.

²⁸⁹ There are certainly exceptions, but mostly due to social and economic background of the student’s family. Also, some schools assign translated or abridged texts for the students’ outside readings.

²⁹⁰ Huan Phinthuphan, ‘การเรียนรู้โดยเน้นผู้เรียนเป็นสำคัญ: ปฏิรูปการศึกษาที่สำคัญยิ่ง’ (Student-Centred Learning: Crucial Education Reform), *Ministry of Education*, 30 October 2009 <http://www.moe.go.th/moe/th/news/detail.php?NewsID=13188&Key=news_research> [accessed 1 August 2017].

habit, are quite unsuccessful in engaging their students in active discussions.²⁹¹ From the viewpoint of an observer, it is quite difficult to obtain nuanced perspectives or witness dynamic learning process from such a quiet class.

Regarding the roles of the lecturers, as mentioned above, they are expected to know everything about the subject and then transfer their knowledge to the students. In the postcolonial literature class I observed, the lecturer took full responsibility for filling the cultural and historical gaps between the students and the text. He discussed at length the context of the 1970s, including the Me generation in the US and the cultural impact of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, as well as Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood Speech in 1968. From time to time, he referred to other cultural productions, such as Coldplay's orientalist music video and the film *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*, when explaining theoretical concepts. Other postcolonial texts, including Jhumpa Lahiri's stories and David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, were also drawn into the discussion in his attempt to link *The Buddha of Suburbia* with other works that the students might have heard of.

Another kind of information provided by the lecturer was the theoretical framework. Using the text as the starting point, the lecturer brought in such postcolonial concepts as double consciousness, mimicry, and self-orientalisation, some of which the students had been introduced to earlier in the semester. When given some key words or reminded of other texts in the module, the students were usually able to identify or match the concepts to fictional situations in the novel. This identification game is probably the form of study that they are most familiar with, since it is similar to the multiple-choice question which is used as a standardised tool to test the students' knowledge in Thai schools as well as in the nationwide entrance examination. However, at least in this case, this matching skill does not enable them to develop critical engagement with the subject they study. At one point, a student simply said the word 'Bhabha' in response to the lecturer's question, and then let the lecturer do his work in explaining the theorist's relevance to the ongoing discussion of the text.

Providing extensive historical, social and theoretical background, the lecturer evidently did his best to facilitate the students' understanding of and critical engagement with the novel. The information and cultural references given are certainly useful both for the current discussions and for further studies of other postcolonial writings. Nonetheless, since the level of participation remained low throughout the sessions, it is

²⁹¹ according to my informal interviews with lecturers at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, and researchers working in close proximity to the educational field during my fieldwork in April–May 2015.

difficult to tell if this information made the students more enthusiastic about postcolonial issues in general or the story of *The Buddha of Suburbia* in particular. Faced with local study habits, the lecturer's pedagogical objective, which was based upon the English literature's academic centre at the metropolises, turned out to reproduce the same pattern of the Thai educational system. The students positioned themselves as the audience of an oration, relying solely upon the speaker who, intentionally or not, spoon-fed them to make sure they obtained a sufficient amount of knowledge within a limited timeframe. Having the lecturer as the source of imported knowledge, the classroom becomes an exclusive space for the students to receive intellectual and professional trainings by the authorities, just like when they are in school, rather than a place where they could expect to find anything relevant to their real life.

Despite all the aforementioned limitations, the class did come across some topics about which the students were relatively knowledgeable and active. From my perspective, they fall into two related postcolonial issues: identity as performance and the politics of representation. According to their responses to the lecturer, the students seemed to understand how characters such as Karim and his father perform their exotic identity and benefit from it. They also acknowledged that this commodification of identity is made possible by the Orientalist gaze. In addition, they could distinguish between an individual and the collective identity of the social group a person belongs to when faced with questions regarding the politics of representation. More importantly, they related the two issues in discussion to their experiences, making remarks that could be considered as their position-taking as Thais, which in turn revealed their class consciousness and ideological assumptions.

The class spent considerable time discussing Haroon as a performer who orientalises himself for financial gains. Asked about her experiences of the Orientalist gaze when she was in the 'North', a student talked about the misperception that Thai people still use elephants as a standard means of transportation. In her interpretation, 'the whites'—a general term Thais use to refer to people in western Europe and North America—have this false assumption because 'They think we are underdeveloped'.²⁹² Remarkably, while imagining a student riding an elephant to school in the 21st century is certainly exoticist, it could be argued that this fanciful scene is not always automatically associated with underdevelopment. For some, it might represent the continuity of ancient tradition or the pre-capitalist mode of being. Therefore, while reasonable and probably

²⁹² The class was conducted in Thai, so all the direct quotations are my translation.

true in some cases, the student's remark at the same time indicates an anxiety of a member of the Thai middle-class, who had had an opportunity to study abroad, about Thailand being seen as a developing country. Evidently, she was not as willing to commodify this version of exotic identity as Haroon, who is seen as a spiritual leader, a guide to the ancient, mythical culture, not a backward animal rider who does not use cars.

In an end-semester journal that the students were asked to write about their favourite text, a student, the only one who chose *The Buddha of Suburbia*, interestingly addressed the issue of self-commodification in a way that also reflects her own social location. Drawing a similarity between Haroon's self-orientalisation and people dressing in tribal clothing in Northern Thailand, she objectively distinguished herself from these tribal-like people as a critic of their behaviour. Her usage of pronouns is worth quoting here:

In Thai, *we* have same commodification as in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. For example, when travelling to Chiang Mai, *you* will see the children wearing as the hill tribe. If you want to take a picture with *them*, *you* have to pay. *We* do not even know that they are real or fake, but the tourists love this. The children or this group of people, if *they* want money, *they* have self-commodification. (emphasis is mine)

While fully acknowledging that this performance for commercial gain is not unusual since 'Everything is construction', this student clearly discriminates 'we' from 'they'; the former refers to the social and cultural group in which she, as well as the lecturer, belongs, and the latter the people dressed in tribal clothing. Living in the same country, 'we' never know who they are. Under capitalism the *chaopa* become even more mysterious than in the past. They can be 'real or fake', since their identity now has economic value. Yet, 'we', the urban observers, are at least aware of the potential deception. More importantly, 'we' do not identify with this commodified Thainess and do not have anything to do with it. This position-taking, on one hand, indicates the heterogeneity of Thailand that its citizens cannot help but acknowledge; on the other hand, it suggests the ambiguous status of the Thai urban middle-class. From the vantage point at the national centre, 'we' are alienated from the other within and at the same time recognise that both 'we' and 'they' are seen as Thai by foreigners, hence 'we' find it necessary to differentiate. It is also noteworthy that, endorsed by the country's Tourism Authority, Thailand indeed massively benefits from the commodification of Thai official traditional culture, such as

the classical Thai dances and Buddha temple tour.²⁹³ This authorised version of Thainess is part of the ‘self’ of the country that is proudly presented to the world, even though it is not more ‘authentic’ than people in tribal costume. Arguably, the remark about the photographable tribal lookalikes could thus be seen as a partial self-reflection upon Thailand’s cultural commodification, specifically the version for which the marginalised are responsible.

Another notable feature of the students’ engagement with *The Buddha of Suburbia* could be found in their discussion about the politics of representation. In the workshop scene in which Karim plays a fictional character based on Anwar, his fellow actor Tracey opposes his action on the basis of the need to prevent black people from being stereotypically seen in a negative light.²⁹⁴ The propriety of her political stance and Karim’s reliance on his real personal experiences was discussed at length. While some students thought that it was acceptable for a ‘true’ portrayal to reproduce stereotypical assumptions about a particular group of people, some were quite reluctant to jump to that conclusion. The latter, recognising that Anwar’s traits are not common to all Indians, pointed out the possibility that it could be misunderstood as universally representative. Nonetheless, they appeared to agree on the premise that no artistic representation should be censured only because it did not portray a member of a minority group in a positive light. The exchanges between the students and the lecturer interestingly demonstrate how the issue of representation of the minority in the UK is viewed by the ‘outsider’:

Student A: Tracey’s afraid that Indian people will be thought of negatively. Is she white?

Lecturer: No, she is an African. I mean, she is black.

Student A: Oh...but Karim is an Indian, and he is not at all worried about it.

Student B: Is it because he’s never been to India? He doesn’t have a deep connection with it.

Lecturer: But what if Tracey has never been to her home country as well? The story doesn’t tell, but the possibility is very low. Her mother is just outside cleaning the stairs.

Student A: Karim thinks the Anwar character is just one person, but Tracey fears it will be stereotyped.

A few noteworthy assumptions were made here. First, the representation of a minority group concerns only its members. They have full authority to do whatever they like with

²⁹³ see examples of Thailand’s images as projected to the world at *Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau* <<http://www.tceb.or.th/index.php>>. The mixture between exotic traditions and technological advancement is highly pronounced.

²⁹⁴ The fact that Tracey as a reader of Karim’s performance became a point of interest in the classroom indicates the potential connection between readers from one social and cultural location and another.

their images (remarkably, the same freedom would not be extended to the tribals in Thailand). Second, the British Indian and the British Afro-Caribbean are different from each other as much as from the white British people. The student A, learning that Tracey is black, continued to argue against her action on the grounds that, black or white, she is not an Indian. From the perspective of an outsider of the multicultural London/Britain in the 1970s when ‘settlers from all the corners of the Empire’ needed political affiliations as ‘black’ minorities, Tracey has nothing to do with Karim’s representation of his own ethnicity.²⁹⁵ In addition, it might not occur to the British readers that Tracey could be mistaken as white. Her social status, her reaction to Karim’s behaviour, as well as Pike’s response to her, all point to a ‘black’ subject position. The student’s confusion might stem from both geographical and historical distance from the setting in the novel. Without direct exposure to the British culture, it is not easy to fill such a huge gap.

As evidenced above, when participating in the group discussion, the students showed their ability to draw a distinction between an individual and the ethnic or cultural group in which s/he belongs; yet, it was not very clear if they individually applied this perspective to their own lives. Asked by the lecturer if they had seen any examples of stereotyping in the media, a student mentioned a news headline with the phrase ‘Chinese tourists’, which, he explained, almost always implicates bad behaviour. Accepting that the assumption under the headlining is racist, he also contended, ‘but it is true’, with support from some other students. Another student commented that Thais were also ‘racist’ among themselves, by which she meant when someone said ‘you are such a Thai person’—the label she found offensive though she did not know exactly what it suggested. She also gave an example from a recent controversy at that time, when a group of young Thai celebrities danced on a Japanese train and posted the video on the social media. ‘And Thais rebuked [people from] their own country for that,’ she added. Although the discussants appeared to use the word ‘racist’ quite loosely, the conversations revealed that they probably viewed Thailand as a country that is susceptible to both stereotyping others and being stereotyped. Yet, drawing the cases of ‘Chinese tourists’ and Thai tourists in Japan together, we could argue that, it is easier for some students to accept as true the stereotype of the ‘other’ than of themselves, and the fact that they felt it was not fair to stereotype Thai people may or may not apply the other way around. Apparently, the students as insiders are aware of diversified kinds of people in Thailand, so they oppose to stereotypical assumptions on the basis that they know such

²⁹⁵ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), p. 93.

assumptions are not true. Such a belief that the full authority belongs to the insiders, whether national or ethnical, is evident in the discussion on Karim's representation of Anwar as well. It is, in effect, not a responsibility of the outsiders to question the others' stereotype, since they would never know if it is accurate.

Under the guidance of the lecturer, reading *The Buddha of Suburbia* in class did lead to some reflections on some key postcolonial issues as I have discussed. However, while the novel is regarded in the UK as having a pivotal part in the literary and cultural movements in the 1990s, for Thai students, it is just not relatable, and the undramatic plot, as well as the detached voice of the narrator, does not help much. Although it is not clear if this disinterest is a result of their training in the Thai educational system or of their social or political positions, I would argue that there are some connections between their responses and the ambiguous position of Thailand as a peripheral country that has never been officially colonised. Since Thailand under the rule of its kings has never been directly controlled by the western empires, people who identify as Thais have never suffered the forced migrations to European countries or other colonial sites as those in the previous colonies did. They do not share diasporic experiences with ethnic minorities in metropolitan locations. Meanwhile, the imported colonial mentality which led to class and ethnic internal segregation has rarely been reflected upon, especially by those middle-class beneficiaries at the national centre, whose sense of identity is constructed through official education and mainstream media. From their point of view, Thailand as an independent country has been unified all along. They do not acknowledge the history of internal colonisation, or the contested voices of the marginalised.²⁹⁶ As demonstrated in the discussion above, the only superficial connection the students have with the characters in the novel is the false images that people in the West have of them. These images, indeed, do not significantly affect their quality of life or even self-esteem.

While the cultural insularity of the country could be blamed for the students' lack of personal and political engagement with the text, the pedagogical application of the postcolonial literary criticism in the peripheral site of education, as well as the theoretical framework itself, should be critically examined as well. As I have discussed in previous chapters, postcolonial scholarly readings sometimes block other possible ways of approaching the texts. They also demand theoretical and literary knowledge that, as seen in this discussion of classroom observations, highlights rather than narrows the cultural and historical gaps between the readers at the core and at the peripheries. Straightforward

²⁹⁶ There are still ongoing conflicts at the southernmost part of Thailand due to the separatist insurgency.

replication of postcolonial studies in the Thai classroom could clearly be problematic, and unlikely to connect the peripheral readers *outside* the texts to the peripheral characters *inside* the texts. Nonetheless, as I also have illustrated in my textual analyses, the literary expressions of social inequality have the potential to actually be relatable to different groups of readers in different ways. What the classroom needs is the contextualised studies, combining the local socio-historical awareness and the international perspectives. Even though its effectiveness could be impaired by other external circumstances such as limited study hours and the students' reading proficiency, it is also possible that the contextualised reading would encourage the students to invest more in their engagement with the texts, and realise the significance of this transnational/transcultural reading.

As I have shown in chapter 1, *The Buddha of Suburbia* anticipates the readers of self-exoticised narratives whose responses to Karim's performances reveal their own position-taking. Further, the book invites its implied readers to identify with different subject positions that together form a web of unequal relations in which a person could be a victim in one situation and a victimiser in another. I contend that, although not entirely unproblematic, this kind of identification did take place in the class discussions at some level. Karim's character might not be able to sustain their interest, but the students found it natural to identify with the object of the orientalist gaze. What they failed to recognise is the fact that certain exotic images of Thai people and tradition, such as the practice of elephant riding that they did not want to associate with, are reproduced and manipulated for commercial and ideological purposes by many Thais, especially the authorities themselves.²⁹⁷ In other words, questions of authenticity aside, Thailand as a country is doing the same thing Haroon and Karim do, that is, commodifying their cultures. Additionally, the students were aware of the possibilities that Thais have prejudices against people with different nationalities such as the Chinese. Although, as common in the classroom environment where consensus is not always achieved, they did not agree if such prejudice was based on reality or not, the awareness indicates a certain degree of self-reflection.

These responses, whether they are evoked by the textual engagement, the group discussion, or just an impulse to participate, could indeed be utilised by the lecturer to make more explicit connections between the students' knowledge and experiences and

²⁹⁷ A very recent evidence is the occasion in which, led by their mahouts, 11 fully decorated elephants, two of them painted white, prostrated in front of the Grand Palace to pay respect to the late king. This is emblematic not only of the exoticist modern construction of Thai identity but also its inseparable connection to the monarchy. The event was very successful in making local and international news (see pictures: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3915652/White-elephants-mahouts-pay-respects-late-Thai-king.html>).

the text in the way that the postcolonial conceptual framework might not immediately encourage. By that I mean, even though it is obvious that Bhabha's mimicry, for example, could be linked to Karim's famous 'I am an Englishman born and bred, almost' statement, the concept may narrow rather than widening the possibility for the students to relate to the protagonist if it made his racial aspect the only focal point of discussion. As I explained in chapter 1, Karim is at the same time a victim of racial and class discrimination in suburban London, an outsider in his father's culture of origin, and an impotent witness of Jamila's experience of gender oppression. Thus, while Bhabha's concept is illuminating and certainly appropriate, the students should as well be encouraged to identify with the intersectional subject positions that a character has in different circumstances and in relation to other characters. Only then, they could reflect upon their own privileged or underprivileged positions, as a member of the middle class in a peripheral country—that defines itself as relatively superior to its neighbours—but at the same time as an individual with their own personal struggles. Putting themselves in the network of power relations, they could potentially comprehend the intersectional mechanism of an oppressive regime that they involve in maintaining, which is itself derivative of global-scale inequalities. The postcolonial theoretical concepts, valid as they are for the framing of issues for discussion, should not prevent students from gaining this kind of recognition which is indeed an important step towards the understanding of people in other locations who are having similar experiences in their own contexts.

That said, certain socio-historical information about the particular context in which the novel came into existence is still necessary. In its dramatisation of the politics of representation, *The Buddha of Suburbia* clearly addresses at least two historical and literary situations relating to the political position of ethnic minorities in the UK. The first is the alliances among the minorities in the 1960s and 1970s that employed 'black' as an umbrella political identity for the non-white. The second is the general expectation among the minorities that the minority writers to do 'public relations' for their ethnicity, the burden that Stuart Hall highly commended Kureishi for refusing as I discussed in chapter 1.²⁹⁸ The background knowledge of these circumstances could have helped the students to understand the dispute between Karim and Tracey in its actual context, and generated more grounded arguments among them regarding the politics of representation. Beyond the question of authenticity, the students could consider, for instance, the dynamic relationship between politics and arts; the significance of Tracey's working-class

²⁹⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities', p. 60.

background; and the power relations between the represented ethnic minorities and the intended audience of their performance. This insight could further shed some new light on their own presuppositions about the clear-cut division between people with different ethnicities in the history of their struggles, as well as the political significance of the (mis)presentation of the oppressed groups.

Following the discussion of Karim and Haroon's self-commodification, the lecturer could also have invited the students to compare it to other acts of commodification such as the ones undertaken by marginalised Thai citizens and the Thai authority itself. They could look at different political and economic conditions in which a person or an institution choose to commodify themselves in a particular way. Upon comparison, they would see the power relations at play between the consumers, be they the white metropolitans or the urban Thais, and the consumed—the Indian spiritual leader, rural Thais in tribal costume or elephant riders in Bangkok. As members of the middle-class, the students are in both the powerful position of the consumer, in relations to the 'others' within, and the powerless one of the consumed, in relation to the outside world. This reflection would lead to a better understanding of both the characters and the marginalised in their own country, as well as to an awareness of Thailand's position within the global stage.

The observation, moreover, helps illustrate further the points I have made about the importance of different kinds of 'peripheral' perspectives as demonstrated in chapter 2-4. In my discussion of Syal's *Anita and Me*, we have seen how the perspective of the internal peripheries of the former empire, namely the working class in the Black Country after deindustrialisation, complicates the way in which inequality is manifested in 1960s England. Meena's self-development as the only Indian girl in the English village should certainly be celebrated, but not without an acknowledgement that she is in a better economic position than her neighbours. The geographical location of Tollington, an outpost of the outpost of the multicultural London as the economic centre of the country, not only emphasises the tension between class and race in the novel, but also visualises centre-periphery inequality on a local scale that is comparable to the mechanism of global capitalism.²⁹⁹ This intersectional approach to the text, which also makes available the perspectives of the unintended readers, could be a potent way to encourage Thai middle class students to reflect upon their own positions. As Thais, they are at the global economic periphery, but as a member of the middle class, they may not feel the effect of

²⁹⁹ At this point, it would be fruitful to add 'The New Metropolis', a chapter from Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* (1975) into the discussion.

being exploited by the global centres as strongly as the working class in their country. That is to say, like Meena, they are at the centre and the periphery at the same time, but, unlike her, they do not have to strive to be accepted within their national space. Therefore, it is possible that they identify with Meena's success and miss Anita's struggles. Potentially, the recognition of the tension between class and race in the novel could make discernible for the students both the sufferings of Anita and Meena at the local peripheries of the global centre, and of the people at the periphery of Thailand. More importantly, the students could think more critically about how they who belong to the privileged class would position themselves within this unjust system.

Anita and Me also makes an excellent case for the issue of core/peripheral readership. As mentioned in chapter 2, Syal's inspiration to write the book was her failure to find Black British protagonists that she could identify with in existing literary works, even the 'postcolonial' ones by American writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. That is to say, Syal used to be a peripheral reader that the British book industry overlooked. Now that the Black British writers of her generation, including Kureishi, have created a solid market for their literary productions, we could say that the members of ethnic minorities in Britain are recognised by the publishers not only as the (under)represented but also as potential readers. This development is undoubtedly parallel to the social and cultural changes in Britain that are in turn articulated through such literary productions as *Anita and Me*. The consideration of these paratextual elements in the Thai classroom could bring to the fore the peripherality of Thailand as both production and reception sites within the global literary space--its complete lack of control over any literary movements or activities at the metropolitan core. More importantly, the status of *Anita and Me* in England as a GCSE English text in contrast to its near non-existence in Thailand indicates the gap between the actual English literary space and the world of English literature as appears in the curriculum at the peripheral site of reception. Canonical literary texts, institutionalised at the centre and transmitted to academic settings on the peripheries, are far from being a complete representation of English culture whose dynamic is constantly shifting. They should be understood, instead, as an academic result of competitions within the English literary world that could always be put under examination. Evidently, agency as a reader (as well as a writer) cannot be exercised by following market or academic trends, but by questioning and pushing the unrecognised voices forward, as Meera Syal and many minority writers successfully did in their context.

Compared to *Anita and Me*, the middle-class perspective of *Brick Lane* is probably more difficult for the students to distance themselves from. As discussed in chapter 4, the book is designed to appeal to a liberal middle-class demographic, especially female. Gender liberation from the oppressive patriarchal world of ‘Islam’ is the main argument of the book, and it is particularly challenging for students in a country that has been in conflict with Muslim separatists for more than a decade to undermine, or even question, this proposition.³⁰⁰ Unlike men in the Bangladeshi community in London who were offended by the book, both male and female students in Thailand could comfortably ally with the narrative of self-development in a similar way as other tourist readers. In other words, as readers in a peripheral country who are neither Bangladeshi nor British but belong to an economically privileged class still, it might be easier for the students to read *with* the grain than *against* it, to identify with or aspire to become a successful immigrant in a global city at the centre than to empathise with the failed ones or the one at another periphery.

The film adaptation in 2007 seems to endorse this approach to the text by almost completely leaving out Hasina’s epistolary sections of the novel. According to the audience responses to the film screening held at Thammasat University’s main library in 2015, which I had an opportunity to co-organise and participate in, the main focus is the domestic life of the Bangladeshis in London and female liberation. In the discussion after the screening, Hasina and Dhaka were barely mentioned. The review of the film by Natthanai Prasannam³⁰¹, on the other hand, draws attention to the ‘politics of home’ in parallel to Nazneen’s self-liberation. In this light, after gaining economic independence, Nazneen, who has been yearning for her imaginary homeland, finds a new home in England. Nazneen and her secret lover Karim, the critic argues, have different definitions of home; Nazneen’s is for an individual, Karim’s, community. The former embraces her new hybrid self, while the latter attaches himself as an extremist to Bengali identity.³⁰² Remarkably, as an academic, Natthanai does not ‘read’ like a tourist. Informed by postcolonial theoretical knowledge, he offers a more critical perspective on the film’s representation of diasporic identity. This vantage point, nonetheless, emphasises how,

³⁰⁰ According to the Pew Research Center, in 2010, around 93% of Thai population are Buddhists while 5.5% are Muslims. See ‘Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050’, *Pew Research Center*, 2 April 2015 < <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/2010/>> [accessed 1 August 2017].

³⁰¹ Natthanai is a film critic and an associate professor at Kasetsart University, another leading institution in Bangkok, Thailand.

³⁰² Natthanai Prasannam, ‘*Brick Lane*: จากพื้นที่ในความทรงจำสู่บ้านใหม่ “นอก” จินตนาการ’ (*Brick Lane*: from the Space in Memories to a New Home “outside” Imagination), *Starpics*, 45.780 (2010), 106-107.

combined with the film's partial interpretation of the novel, emphasis on such a postcolonial concept as hybridity could lead to an endorsement of the liberal capitalist perspective that dismisses Chanu's and Karim's struggles as personal and ideological vanity, and simply ignores Hasina's suffering.

I contend that the classroom could be a space where such a perspective, together with the *Bildungsroman* narrative that encourages it, is questioned and resisted. Instead of identifying with the protagonist of *Brick Lane*, the students could look at what this female *Bildungsroman* leaves unsaid and unresolved, considering, for example, how the story of development generates an impression of London as a multicultural city of opportunities and Dhaka as almost everything opposite to it; why it seems more 'natural' to empathise with Nazneen instead of other characters, especially Hasina; and what elements of life in England actually facilitate Nazneen's self-liberation and why they do not work in the same way with Chanu. By shifting the focus from Nazneen, the centre of the narrative, to the peripheral characters whose calamities the text simply dismisses, they would be reading against the white middle-class perspective. Nuanced discussions on the way in which class, race and gender tension is articulated in the text could potentially bring forth a kind of self-reflection on the students' own ideological assumptions about marginalised groups in Thailand. Moreover, as members of a developing country affected by global capitalism, the students could find Dhaka more relatable than London is. If such identification does not happen, it might be worthwhile to examine the way in which a literary text obstructs people in different peripheral locations from seeing each other instead of realising it.

While racial and gender issues could overshadow unequal economic opportunities in *Anita and Me* and *Brick Lane* respectively, the philosophical dramatisation of a hybrid self in *The Impressionist* makes a more complicated case when peripheral readership is taken into consideration. As I have pointed out in chapter 3, the novel renders manifest the disjuncture of postcolonial readership. The academic and non-academic readers approach the text with different sets of values, and produce dissenting voices that potentially trigger self-critique among postcolonial literary scholars. In the Thai classroom, that is, an academic sphere at a peripheral site of reception, it could be derived from the way the *Buddha of Suburbia* class was conducted that the lecturer would equip the students with such theoretical concepts as hybridity and nomadism if they were to read the book. Indicatively, in the global literary academic field, the gap between the centre and its periphery is unlikely to induce dissenting voices. Such a peripheral literary academy as in Thailand needs to follow the rules of reading generated at the centre and

disseminated through scholarly work that Thai academics need to consult to keep up with the international standard. Postcolonial literary criticism, arguably, could be received in this context as part of the production of the globally standardised elite reader.

Nonetheless, even this goal is not easily achieved. As Frederick Luis Aldama announces, in order to solve the ‘puzzle’ that *The Impressionist* sets up, the reader needs to have ‘memories’ of precursor texts that the novel refers to.³⁰³ From my account of the class discussions, it is very likely that Thai students do not have adequate amount of such ‘memories’ to be able to fully appreciate the novel in the way it is intended for the ideal reader. The fact that this kind of literary knowledge has to be accumulated through time and within a particular literary culture emphasises the cultural distance between the centre and the periphery that seems almost impossible to redress, especially with the time constraints of the seminar. Despite being trained readers, who are technically in the process of becoming professional readers, these students could be closer to the general readers at the centre in terms of their literary proficiency, and should not be expected to become the ideal reader of the text. The refusal to pursue the same route of reading as the metropolitan academics does not always mean lowering expectations for the students or reducing the complexity of the text. Through a combination of local and international perspectives, a reading from the academic periphery could indeed enhance learning experiences as well as realising the potential of the text to engage the readers beyond the centre of the global literary field.

One way to have a meaningful engagement with the novel is to read it both as a symbolic and realist representation of (post)colonial experience. While discussing hybridity or nomadism might be unavoidable in such an academic sphere as the classroom, it should not prevent the students from reading *The Impressionist* as a historical novel about global imperialism that has paved the way to present-day global capitalism. I would call this latter approach a peripheral perspective, that is, one outside the theoretical framework within which the novel is created by the author and received by academics. It would demand a resistance to automatic theoretical application from those who already possess a certain level of theoretical knowledge. By this dual level of interpretation, the Thai students could, on one hand, practice using theoretical tools, and, on the other hand, reflect on their limitations. The objective of the former is to develop a conceptual understanding of postcolonial literary production in the wider context; the latter, to relate the classroom exercise to their real life. While the theoretical framework

³⁰³ Aldama, *A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction*, p. 102.

possibly produces professional, ‘standardised’ readings, the contextualised identification could reveal how particularities of the readers’ dispositions might also have a global/universal repercussion. This ability to connect themselves to the outside world may in turn enable them to gain a better understanding of postcolonial theory and realise the way in which the abstract concepts could resonate with them.

As illustrated in chapter 3, the journeys of the *Impressionist*'s protagonist provide the reader with a global view of peripheral sites affected by colonial invasions. The novel thus transcends the national boundary and interpellates the reader as a member of the transnational oppressive system. While following the course of the story, Thai students could put Thailand into this global phenomenon so as to actively engage with it. An obvious instance is Jonathan Bridgeman’s account of the Empire Exhibition which is evocative of Siam’s participation in the World’s Fairs in several occasions. According to Thongchai, by the early twentieth century, Siam had exhibited at the fairs in Paris, Chicago, St. Louis, and Turin, to name only major sites. Even though it missed Wembley, the one Bridgeman visits, since it was held particularly for the British Empire, the kingdom did eagerly send ‘a village, people, and a dancing troupe’ to be part of the ‘world’s gala’ in many other exhibitions of colonial power.³⁰⁴ With this particular history of Thailand in mind, the students could comprehend the novel’s mockery of the Exhibition and its portrayal of the human displays in a possibly uncomfortable but enlightening way. Not only that the Empire is seen in a ridiculous light, but Siam also appears not so glorious when put in a global context at the time. To be more precise, its location is:

among the independent countries from the Far East or among the exotic, the half-civilized, or the inferior civilizations, such as among Haiti and the Caribbean islands at the Chicago Fair. The only time Siam was picky about the location of its pavilion was at the 1900 Paris exhibition, where Siam was originally placed among the colonies. Siam refused and was relocated.³⁰⁵

Evidently, even though it was not anyone’s colony, Siam voluntarily participated in holding up colonial power in order to be relevant, and the attempts did not seem to make it ‘civilised’ or far more superior to other colonies in the eye of the hosts. The recognition of Siam’s relative position among other countries could facilitate Thai readers’ identification with the subjects of the British Empire as displayed in the Exhibition scene in the novel. From there, further critical engagement with the text, and probably an introduction to such concepts as the imperial gaze, could follow. Reading *The*

³⁰⁴ Thongchai, ‘The Quest for “Siwilai”’, p. 541.

³⁰⁵ Thongchai, p. 541.

Impressionist as a literary expression of the history of colonial oppression, thus, could be a productive way to develop a comparative approach that would shed new light on both the text and the reader's ideological assumptions. Nonetheless, it certainly requires an integration of historical and literary literacy that the lecturer has a crucial role in helping the students to develop.

In this chapter, I have examined the socio-ideological conditions, as well as disciplinary limitations in Thai academia, that affect the way in which postcolonial literature is received in Thailand. This awareness of the particularity of a peripheral reception site is crucial, not only to local literary academics who need to develop their pedagogical methods accordingly, but also to international academics at the metropolises currently working on the 'problem' called world literature.³⁰⁶ Only after the readers at the peripheral receiving end are brought into consideration would the category of global readership within the field of world literary studies become possible. As I have shown in chapter 1-4, postcolonial texts produced at the metropole have potential to be read outside it. These works could also be considered 'world literature' in the sense that they can resonate with the global/peripheral readers differently from reading approaches employed by the white metropolitan middle and upper classes. With regard to reception studies, my analysis of the Thai literature classroom has proved how thinking beyond the postcolonial theoretical framework could be beneficial for learners at the periphery. Moreover, while privileging the readings of the professional over the lay readers is certainly problematic, it is possible that the two groups of readers benefit from each other. Literature scholars might draw from the general readers' responses to develop a tentative reading framework, that could in turn be localised into a particular site of reception. Through an intersectional, contextualised reading, the literary articulation of inequality could create engaging reading experiences. Although a reader still needs to be 'trained' to develop such an approach to the texts, I maintain that this method is by no means authoritative. Rather, it is a result of the dynamic relationship between the professional readers and those who are less familiar with academic tools who inform each other from their own dispositions. Hopefully, this communication could render realisable the relevance of literary work and criticism to the real, political world, in which everyone is an active member.

³⁰⁶ 'World literature is not an object, it's a *problem*' (Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on world literature', *New Left Review* 1 (2000), 54-68 (p. 55)).

Conclusion

In this thesis, I located a selection of South Asian British novels within the global literary context by anticipating ways in which they could be read by readers outside the white middle-class metropolitan category. To chart an uneven world republic of letters, I combined my textual and extratextual analyses with a case study of a peripheral site of reception in Thailand. My discussions throughout the five chapters could be summarised as a call for a reading beyond what I see as dominant features within the field of postcolonial literary consumption: identity politics, methods of interpretation provided by postcolonial literary theory, and the idea of homogenous ‘majority’ readership. In this conclusion, I revisit my chapter arguments in relation to these features. Then, I discuss the limitations of my research and offer some suggestions for future studies. Finally, I provide an overview of an analytical category called the contemporary ‘South Asian British’ writers in the light of the current social and political climate. While these writers are gaining a more central position in the world literary system, their works also indicate an increasingly ‘globalised’ outlook that does not necessarily entail a departure from the geographical and historical specificity. The ‘development’ of this group of writers, thus, could be evidence of a need for literary scholars to continue to develop a ‘global’ perspective in order to account for multifaceted changes in the global literary field, both at the production and reception sites.

Seeing the ‘City’ in the ‘Country’: Towards the recognition of the ‘Common History’

A social process is happening there, in an initially unfamiliar society, and that is its importance. But as we gain perspective, from the long history of the literature of country and city, we see how much, at different times and in different places, it is a connecting process, in what has to be seen ultimately as common history.³⁰⁷

In his interview with Claire Chambers published in 2011, Kureishi calls for a departure from identity politics and for a development of a new form of identification suitable for the current dispensation. His observation obviously derives from the threat of global capitalism:

There was a time when it was useful and politically potent to define oneself as Lesbian, gay, Black, Asian, Muslim, Hindu, transsexual. All those definitions

³⁰⁷ Williams, p. 288.

came out of the 1970s, were refined in the 1980s, and really developed under Blair. It seems that now we need wider identifications, in terms, probably, of class, or other identifications that we haven't thought of yet. The important identifications are of the people who need jobs, or housing. Their demands are not to do with their ethnicity, but their position as regards the financial crash. A poor Muslim, a poor gay, and so on, would have more in common with each other in terms of wanting education, resources, or work. New creative forms of alliances are needed.³⁰⁸

His disagreement with 'narrow' political identifications could indeed be seen back in 1990. Although *The Buddha of Suburbia* has now been institutionalised as exemplary of works by second-generation immigrants in Britain, I argued in chapter 1 that the novel encourages the reader to identify with the protagonist's multiple and contingent social positions. Its self-conscious presentation of Karim as a performer of racialised subjects does not overshadow Karim as a person who could be both a victim and a victimiser in different contexts. *Anita and Me*, by contrast, presents Meena the protagonist as a highly racialised subject, resulting in its almost homogenous critical reception which focuses on Meena's ethnic and cultural identity. However, the novel's presentation of the white working-class community through Meena's point of view allows the reader to have another peripheral perspective apart from the racialised one. My reading of the book called into question the uncritical celebration of multiculturalism under capitalism and demonstrated a possible way to understand the class/race tension within the capitalist world-system. In the case of *Brick Lane*, liberal Britain is celebrated for its apparent race and gender neutrality. Through the viewpoint of a female migrant worker, the novel seems to speak from the class, race, and gender peripheries. Yet Nazneen turns out to be speaking from the economic core to endorse capitalism as the means for gender liberation. She reproduces the capitalist myth of development at the expense of other male and female characters who cannot afford to be incorporated the way she does. The novel's self-positioning as a feminist text, with its isolation of the female ethnic minorities' problem from those of other marginalised groups, cannot account for racial and economic oppressions which are actually inseparable from gender oppression. My analysis of the book underscored the importance of the intersectional reading that would make visible its underlying ideological premise.

With regards to postcolonial theory, I emphasised throughout the thesis that such concepts as hybridity, performativity, and cultural diversity, as well as such literary techniques as the use of intertextuality, could reduce rather than enhance the potential of

³⁰⁸ Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions*, pp. 234-35.

the text to engage a wider readership. In chapter 2, I demonstrated how, for example, a reader who endorses Meena's assertion of cultural power over her white working-class friends fails to address her class prejudice that contributes to another form of oppression. The focus on the racial aspect of the novel by its interpretive community at the centre also makes scholarly literature outside the categories of postcolonial and ethnic minority literature peripheral to the discussions of the book. I contended that shifting attention to Anita and Meena's different kinds of struggles under Britain's capitalist structure enables the readers, both within and beyond the field of postcolonial literary consumption, to see the issue of racial discrimination in a new light. Unlike *Anita and Me*, *The Impressionist* seeks to avoid identity politics by creating an identity-less protagonist. Nonetheless, it invests even more heavily in postmodernist as well as postcolonial theories, particularly hybridity and performativity. Its intertextual references to the narratives of the Empire are subtler than those in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which also means less easily detected for the uninitiated. Using evidence from *Goodreads*, I discussed how the novel's narrative formation points to the unevenness in the global literary field. It reveals the discrepancy between the readers at the centre and at the periphery in economic, educational and geographical terms. Those in the reading class, largely consisting of well-educated middle-to-upper class metropolitans, possess greater theoretical and literary knowledge than readers with lower educational background and limited access to cultural resources. Even professional or trained readers in different sites of reception cannot be said to play in the same even field. As I demonstrated in chapter 5, such readers at the periphery are subjected to, among other things, socio-ideological and institutional conditions that make it difficult for them to relate to the texts in a theoretically and culturally informed way like those at the centre. When thinking of professional readers at such a literary metropole as London in conjunction with the lay readers in Thailand, we could easily see an even wider gap between them. My reading of *The Impressionist*, therefore, drew attention to the realist aspect of the text. It treats the narrator's omniscient point of view as an invitation to the totality of the world in which the protagonist is coerced to play a particular role at a particular moment. Even though his identity is being constantly reconstructed, he is consistently a subject of the colonial capitalist world-system, the position that could resonate more strongly with peripheral readers than with the middle-class metropolitans who occupy the central position in such a system.

My last concern is the assumption about the white metropolitan readership of postcolonial literature prevalent in literary academia. According to existing scholarly reception, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *Brick Lane* generates more discussion in this

regard than the other two for different reasons. The former came out at the moment when politics of representation still carried considerable weight in the field of postcolonial literary production. As I discussed in chapter 1, how to speak to the majority audience for the ethnic minority communities was as much a political question as an aesthetic one. *Brick Lane*, published a little over a decade later, hit the market as a literary sensation when minority writing had become part of the mainstream. Therefore, its endorsement of capitalism is sceptically viewed by several critics as especially catered to the taste of the white middle-class readers who contribute significantly to the market. While it is true to a large extent that all the novels I examined in this thesis are initially written for the Anglophone literary marketplace, my analysis of the implied readers and the reception of each text complicated the way in which we could address the issue of postcolonial readership. More importantly, I argued for collaborative work between local and international literary scholars to actually expand this category of readers. In order to disturb the dominant position of the white middle-class metropolitans in the postcolonial literary field, we need to, first and foremost, pay more attention to peripheral or unrecognised sites of reception. Even if the readers at these sites are unintended readers, their readings of the texts, and in some cases their misreading or not-reading, should be taken into consideration. Some may argue that the task of giving voice to a particular marginalised group is the responsibility of the writer, but I contend it is within the interpretive community at the centre that the unintended readers should be recognised and given values in the first place. One way for literary critics to develop a reading approach that help to render these readers imaginable is to be attentive to the peripheral perspectives in the texts. To illustrate, Changez's response to Karim's performance, Anita's deprived condition, and Chanu's unfulfilled ambition, for example, provide alternative ways in which peripheral readers could identify themselves with the stories. Another way is not to easily dismiss the responses to the texts that do not comply with professional reading practices. My discussion of some Sylheti men's opposition to *Brick Lane* and the amateur reviewers' criticism of *The Impressionist* are cases in point. Further, to be able to put hypothetical readings into practice, we also need to acquire understanding of the perspectives of the actual readers at the peripheral sites of reception. My case study in chapter 5 is an illustration of such an attempt.

In the epigraph to this concluding chapter, Raymond Williams points out the 'common history' between Britain and 'an initially unfamiliar society'. Considering the literature of the 'colonial peoples' in tandem with the portrayals of the country and the city in the history of British literature, he argues, makes visible the 'connecting process'

of British colonialism *within* and *outside* Britain. This critical vantage point is certainly crucial for a reader at the centre of the British empire to approach what has become known as postcolonial literature. It allows her to gain perspective of the core-periphery relations in both local and global scales, and locate herself and people from the previous colonies within the same system. I would further suggest that, for a reader at the peripheral site of reception, this perspective not only enables her to see the totality of the world-system in which she is at the margin, but also asks her to reflect on her position within her own national space. An urban middle-class reader in Thailand, for example, could identify herself with the 'country' in light of Thailand's peripheral position in the world-system. Simultaneously, in terms of her class position and geographical location in the country, she is part of the 'city' that profits from the ruin of the 'country'. With this dual task of critical reflection, the reading class at the periphery appears to have a weightier burden than those at the centre. They need to acknowledge themselves as both the oppressed in one context and the oppressor in another. Nonetheless, it could also be said that they are in a better position to understand the combined and uneven world-system as it really is.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As my textual analyses reveal, the four novels under study are comparable in terms of their engagement with the *Bildungsroman* plot structure, which carries different implications in each book regarding its readership. Together, they allow me to examine a range of possible problems that could occur in the field of postcolonial literary consumption and to develop alternative ways of reading to address them. However, I confine my study within the works written by South Asian British authors during the 1990s to the early 2000s. There are two bodies of work published during this period that could have been valuable additions to my project if the thesis has not been limited by time and writing space. The first one is Indian writing in English, particularly the works that have become institutionalised in Britain such as Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). It could be said that such works, even though they are produced by writers who live outside Britain, are quite similar to the novels by South Asian British writers in terms of their visibility in the British market and academia. Another group of works that could have featured in my study is the novels by British-based writers from different ethnic minority backgrounds, of which the highly acclaimed Zadie Smith is a prime example. Like the novels under study, such minority literature has been faced with politics of representation, and is also subjected to an ambiguous position as the 'centric-eccentric'. These celebrated works from both the Subcontinent and the other ethnic

communities could contribute to a wider perspective on the issue of postcolonial readership at the literary centre. I encourage other researchers to continue working to obtain this insight in the future.

Another aspect of enquiry that could have extended my discussion from the 'reader' to the 'audience' is the adaptation of the examined novels into a television serial (*The Buddha of Suburbia*), a stage play (*Anita and Me*) and a film (*Anita and Me* and *Brick Lane*). All these adaptations are especially interesting with regard to their new relationship with the audience in a different context from the original versions. Indeed, as I mentioned in chapter 4, the act of reproducing the novels in a new format is also a form of reception. Therefore, in addition to the comparison between the novels and the adaptations, it might be useful to look at the directors' reinterpretation, the demographics of the audience, the critical responses, as well as the social and political context in which the new productions took place. Even the fact that *The Impressionist* is the only one that has not been adapted is worth discussing, not only in terms of its adaptability, but also its readability. The context of *Anita and Me*'s stage production, first in 2015 and again after Brexit, suggests an important point of examination concerning the tension between race and class as expressed in both the original and the adaptation. However, precisely because of the various possibilities of analyses that these productions could offer on their own, I feel that it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address all of them adequately. Rather, I believe they are excellent materials for the contextualised studies of ethnic minorities in the media. Such a project would make a significant contribution to the field of postcolonial reception studies.

As for the case study, my qualitative work aims at demonstrating the discrepancy between postcolonial literary academia at the centre and at the periphery. While the classroom observations allowed me to develop a contextualised reading approach suitable to an academic context, the students could not be taken as representative of the general readers in Thailand. To gain an insight into Thailand's reading culture, a combination of qualitative and quantitative works is needed. In my discussion, I touched on the commercial sector, namely the publishers and the bookshops, only to point out the unpopularity of the postcolonial literature in Thailand. It is necessary to conduct quantitative researches on Thailand's book industry and the consuming behavior of the readers in the market before arriving at any generalisable theory about the Thai readers. I consider them as the next step towards an understanding of this peripheral site of reception. Combined with a number of qualitative researches, quantitative data could

hopefully enhance both local and international scholars' knowledge about the peripheral readership within this global literary system.

South Asian British writers in the trope of development: From national to global society

Now that more than a decade has passed since the first publication of *Brick Lane*, the latest among the four novels examined in this thesis, some observations could be made about their authors. Considering their creative works and public engagement, we could see the consistency of these authors' social and literary ambitions already present in their debuts. Kureishi has persistently been vocal about Britain's social inequality, particularly on the basis of class. However, he has recently become more concerned about racial discrimination due to a growing hostility towards immigrants in Britain. Early this year, he made an argument about the 'racist' British middle-class in an interview with Alex Clark. Referring mockingly to himself and the interviewer as 'the hated metropolitan elite', Kureishi maintains his class perspective in his analysis of the current prevalence of racism in Britain, the degree of which he claims comparable to that of the 1930s:

I don't think it's the working class. People say it's the working class, finally they have risen up, had enough, been deprived, and finally said, 'Well it's the Poles and the Pakis,' et cetera. I don't think so. I think it's a large section of the middle class who are really losing their place. They are more racist than they have ever been.³⁰⁹

While this point is certainly debatable, as evident in the comment section of the interview, Kureishi's remark provokes the reader into rethinking the dominant discourse in the media that puts the white working-class against ethnic minorities. He seems to suggest that people who feel threatened by the immigrants nowadays are indeed the middle-class Britons, the same demographic as the 'majority' readers who like to see themselves as anti-racists when reading an immigrant writing. Syal, similarly, continues to battle against discrimination in the mainstream media. She recently commented on British television's regression in the representation of South Asians. In this 'conservative climate', she notes, 'when people think of stuff with South Asians in, it tends to be programmes like the upcoming Rochdale abuse drama'.³¹⁰ Accepting that Rochdale 'is a worthy subject to

³⁰⁹ Alex Clark, 'Hanif Kureishi: "Britain's middle class is more racist now than ever"', *Guardian*, 21 April 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/21/hanif-kureishi-interview-britain-middle-class-more-racist>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

³¹⁰ Syal refers to the BBC's miniseries *Three Girls* (2017), which is based on the true story about the victims of child grooming and sexual abuse in Rochdale, Manchester in 2008–2012. Eight of the nine convicts are of Pakistani origin; the other is from Afghanistan.

investigate', Syal also suggests that 'we should also be thinking about stories that just show us as people, not issues'.³¹¹ In the light of her observation, the issue of underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the media still persists nowadays, and probably gets worse comparing to the last twenty years after *Anita and Me* was first published. Evidently, Syal uses her prominent position in the British entertainment industry to push for unprejudiced depiction of South Asians in the public arena, like she did in her first novel.

The other two novelists concern themselves with slightly different social and cultural issues. This is less because they have abandoned the 'burden' to speak for their communities, than because, as I mentioned in the introduction, their works are relatively 'free' from such a burden compared to the two older writers from the beginning. Kunzru, who is now based in the US, has always been outspoken about freedom of expression. In addition to writing a letter defending *Brick Lane* in 2007, he quoted from Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in the Jaipur literature festival in 2012, the action that resulted in his immediately leaving India afterwards.³¹² His other novels are set in either Britain or America, dealing with the themes of race, belief, and global capitalism, all are discernable in *The Impressionist. White Tears* (2017), Kunzru's latest novel about black music set in contemporary New York, is reminiscent of his debut in terms of form and literary technique. Claire Howorth describes the book as 'part ghost story, part travelogue' and a 'treatise on race, class and poverty of the soul'. She also identifies the novel's literary allusions which include works of James Baldwin, Thomas Mann and Ralph Ellison.³¹³ In contrast with Kunzru's consistent thematic interests, Ali's later novels move into quite diversified terrains, including a rural Portuguese village, a kitchen of the Imperial Hotel, and an American small town where Princess Diana lives a quiet life after faking her own death. Admittedly, while *Brick Lane* is the most widely known among the four novels, Ali's name has rarely been mentioned in the public other than in reference to her first book. Nonetheless, Ali gets engaged in charity works for prisoners and released offenders, becoming a member of the Independent Monitoring Board at Brixton prison

³¹¹ Thomas Ling, 'Meera Syal: the portrayal of Asians on British TV has "gone backwards"', *Radio Times*, 6 March 2017 <<http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2017-03-06/meera-syal-the-portrayal-of-asians-on-british-tv-has-gone-backwards/>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

³¹² Hari Kunzru, 'Why I quoted from The Satanic Verses', *Guardian*, 22 January 2012 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/22/i-quoted-satanic-verses-support-rushdie?intcmp=239>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

³¹³ Claire Howorth, 'Book Review: Hari Kunzru's "White Tears" Is Beautiful and Strange', *Time*, 16 March 2017 <<http://time.com/4703313/white-tears-hari-kunzru-review/>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

and a trustee of St Giles Trust.³¹⁴ It could be said that now that she is securely in the position of incorporation as a decent British citizen, she chooses to contribute to the society in her individual way.

Apparently, all four writers are in good positions in their literary career. Considering notable successes of other South Asian British novelists, especially those born after 1970 or come to prominence in the literary marketplace in the late 2000s, we could assume that this group of writers have gained an increasingly central position in the British literary field. Their names regularly appear in the lists of prestigious literary awards, including the Man Booker Prize. Kamila Shamsie (1973), Tahmima Anam (1975) and Sunjeev Sahota (1981) are on *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists 2013 list. Anam won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book in 2008. Shamsie's latest novel was longlisted for the Booker this year; Sahota's was shortlisted in 2015. Since 2014, London has its own annual Jaipur Literature Festival, showcasing South Asia's literary works and performing arts, first as part of the Alchemy Festival at Southbank Centre and now on its own at the British Library.³¹⁵ It should also be noticed that these Anglophone writers who have been identified with South Asian region have generally become more 'cosmopolitan' than the earlier writers of the same category. Both Shamsie and Anam were born in the Subcontinent (Karachi and Dhaka respectively), got their degrees in the US and later moved to London. Zia Haider Rahman, whose debut in 2014 received international critical acclaim, was born in rural Bangladesh, grew up in a council flat in East London, received higher education in Oxford, worked as a banker in New York, and later became an international human rights lawyer.³¹⁶ Mohsin Hamid, twice shortlisted for the Booker, was born in Lahore, got a degree from Princeton, and now lives in London with British citizenship, while still moving back and forth between the three locations.³¹⁷ Their freedom of movement certainly influences their literary productions, which are arguably more 'global' in perspective than the earlier works. As Hamid illustratively describes different positions from which he writes each of his novels:

The Reluctant Fundamentalist was written in significant part looking back on

³¹⁴ Monica Ali, 'The reality of Chris Grayling's probation revolution – "£46 goes nowhere"', *Guardian*, 20 March 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/mar/20/chris-grayling-probation-revolution-prisoners-reoffending>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

³¹⁵ See the festival's official website at <https://jaipurliteraturefestival.org>, and the London's 2017 programme at <https://www.bl.uk/events/zee-jaipur-literature-festival>.

³¹⁶ Liz Hoggard and others, 'Meet the debut authors of 2014', *Guardian*, 12 January 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/12/debut-authors-2014-observer-fiction>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

³¹⁷ Carl Wilkinson, 'Mohsin Hamid: "I'm back!" "Why? Are you crazy?"', *Financial Times*, 10 March 2017 <<https://www.ft.com/content/fa70bbb2-035d-11e7-aa5b-6bb07f5c8e12>> [accessed 10 September 2017].

America while living in London, and that reflects itself in the European modernist structure and the particular voice. *Moth Smoke* was written looking at Pakistan from America, and there is a much more Americanised voice and perspective in that book. *And How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) was looking at Pakistan from Pakistan, but having been to lots of other places.³¹⁸

Therefore, even though, technically, the category of South Asian British literature still exists in both literary academia and international literary festivals, the works of writers in such a category have evidently transcended the ethnic and national boundaries that designate its name.

If we consider this literary category within the *Bildungsroman* trope, we might be tempted to say that the youthful literature of the former colonies has been fully integrated as part of the British literary heritage. However plausible, this deduction could be a little too optimistic and too pessimistic at the same time. It suggests that there is no more prejudice against writers with South Asian background within British literary community, which is not true. As Rahman recounts being described by the Man Booker Prize administration as ‘a Bangladeshi banker turned novelist’, it is apparent that Britishness is still viewed by some, including those in the book industry, as belonging exclusively to ‘white Britons’.³¹⁹ On the other hand, it is not so hopeful to think that the spirit of resistance to the centre has all disappeared from this previously peripheral group of writers during the process of literary consecration. While some writers may actually be content with their secure position, as the discussion above reveals, some still feel the urge to speak out against existing social and institutional discrimination, and to intervene in making Britain a more equal and inclusive society for all its citizens.

I suggest that we put this apparently ‘new’ development in a global context. Many of the writers considered in this thesis have proved through their works that they have a place in the world beyond the British state that is authorised to issue them their passports. As my chapters on each novel also showed, even such a ‘local’ writer as Syal produces work that can resonate with other peripheral parts of the world under the same capitalist system. Not unlike other literatures from previously social and cultural peripheries, South Asian British literature is in the process of becoming a fully developed ‘citizen’ of the world republic of letters that is constantly redefined by its members. Transcending the novelistic tradition of ‘preservation’ of the English *Bildungsroman*, this rich body of

³¹⁸ Wilkinson, ‘Mohsin Hamid: “I’m back!” “Why? Are you crazy?”’.

³¹⁹ Zia Haider Rahman, ‘Oh, So Now I’m Bangladeshi?’, *New York Times*, 10 April 2016
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/10/opinion/oh-so-now-im-bangladeshi.html?mcubz=1> [accessed 10 September 2017]

literature facilitates its readers to envision the global society as ‘a system still unstable and precariously legitimized’.³²⁰

³²⁰ Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 185.

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