Mixed Messages within
"The Buddha of Suburbia"
Abstract
The mixed messages provided in *The Buddha of Suburbia* together with its prevalent use of humour are the focal point for this essay. The aim is to defend my thesis statement that humour provides a justifiable forum for the critique and presentation of society, enabling the facilitation of serious, effective and powerful perspectives. As critical standpoints a mixture of Postcolonial and Marxist theories are applied together with Bakhtin’s theory of carnevalesque. By comparing historic facts with the portrayed environment depicted in the novel, a message is delivered that a change of a different worldview is required. This message is displayed with various uses of humour, wit and satire, which provide an allegorical veil for its seriousness. This analysis shows that there are no seeming changes in the lives of the characters, but it highlights that a need for a change of views is important.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 4

2. Method and Theory .............................................................................................................................. 5

   2.1 Critical Perspectives ......................................................................................................................... 5
   2.2 Carnevaleesque ............................................................................................................................... 7
   2.3 Humour, Wit, Satire and Allegory .................................................................................................... 8

3. Background ............................................................................................................................................. 11

   3.1 Society ............................................................................................................................................ 11
   3.2 Immigration ................................................................................................................................... 12
   3.3 Youth Culture ................................................................................................................................ 14

4. Analysis of the Novel ........................................................................................................................... 15

   4.1 Mixed Messages ............................................................................................................................... 15
   4.2 Mixed Use of Wit and Humour ......................................................................................................... 17
   4.3 Mixed Cultures ............................................................................................................................... 18
   4.4 Mixed Aspects of Society ............................................................................................................... 20
   4.5 ‘Otherness’ as Sources of Energy and Potential Change ................................................................. 22

5 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 24

6 References .............................................................................................................................................. 26
1. Introduction

Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* was published in 1990. The novel is about growing up in the late 70s in a London suburb, which would entail a story in itself. However, by reading the first few lines of the novel it is obvious that this is not only about the issue of growing up. The way in which Kureishi introduces his protagonist, seventeen-year-old Karim: “…I am an Englishman born and bred, almost… (though not proud of it)” (3) presents a rather more complex issue than that of ‘just’ growing up. As a consequence the statement also presents itself with questions.

Firstly, one must obviously ask the question why Karim is not proud of being an Englishman, and consider the answers to this question in relation to the text.

Secondly, the ‘almost’ in the quote above produces a question of what it meant to grow up in the heart of a fading Empire in the late 70s, early 80s, when you, although “British born and bred” did not belong in the same sense as ‘others’. This question in itself addresses who did belong in the society Kureishi introduces to the reader.

Thirdly, as a consequence of the questions above one can further ask what effect the ‘Empire’ has had on the claim to what it entails to be called British.

*The Independent on Sunday*’s blurb on the back cover of the novel describes it, as: “One of the best comic novels of growing up, and one of the sharpest satires on race relations in this country…”. In *Contemporary Fiction*, Jago Morrison questions Kureishi’s appropriateness of using farce to approach the problem of ‘race’ and calls it “a high-risk strategy” together with “sugar-coating race hatred with humour” (184). But my question to Morrison’s is: Does Kureishi single out just one side of his ethnic inheritance for this farce attack, or does the word pluralism include all characters in this treatment? Another angle to question this is which type of humour is displayed in the text and could the manner in which it is displayed be categorised as an allegory to face up to oppressive class and race divisions?

The aim of this essay is to elucidate the above questions by drawing parallels to the novel with my chosen theory and method.

Humour is prevalent throughout *The Buddha of Suburbia* and whether or not it could be labelled an allegory, or covert, to the actual theme of the novel, will also be questioned. The focal point of this essay will be my thesis statement: humour provides a justifiable forum for the critique and presentation of society, enabling the facilitation of serious, effective and powerful perspectives.
2. Method and Theory

My chosen method and theories are selected critical perspectives, viewpoints from Bakhtin’s theory of carnavalesque and an insight to humour, wit and allegory. Quotes from the novel will be discussed and viewed from the perspective of above theories.

Longer quotes from the novel have been selected for inclusion when it is essential to obtain fully the understanding and punch line of what is being said. Paraphrased text of the novel will also be used in order to explain certain contexts.

The title of the novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, will from now on be abbreviated to *BoS*.

2.1 Critical Perspectives

A combination of Postcolonial and Marxist criticism will be applied as analytic tools in order to develop the essay’s perspective. The following paragraphs will provide an explanation as to why I have considered the use of two theories necessary in order to write this essay.

Vilashini Cooppan writes that the term post-colonial apart from labelling a contemporary critical discourse also “compresses several distinct eras and arenas of colonialism and imperialism, individual struggles of decolonization, subsequent regimes of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism and various post-World War II movements of exile, migration…”, without distinguishing between the differences of history, geography, place and politics (2). Postcolonial studies celebrate and emphasise people’s historical differences on a theoretical and discursive level whilst methodologically the differences are condensed. Cooppan also refers to Bill Ashcroft’s, Gareth Griffith’s and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back*, which was published in 1989 and voiced themes that were common to all postcolonial literatures; they all shared a rebellious message of division between them and us, and “imperial polarities” (3). However, there has been a change of approach in postcolonial literature, which Cooppan highlights with a quote from Timothy Brennan. He states in his book *At Home in the World*, which was published in 1997, that “we have for some time now been witnessing a shift from a binary otherness to a single, internally rich and disparate plurality…” (3). One of the themes in *BoS*, is that of belonging and being part of something, therefore the more recent perspectives of postcolonial studies will be applied for part of the analysis of the novel. There is although a divisional perspective which has to be explored, due to the fact of Karim’s hybrid genetic inheritance.

Peter Barry writes that “the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one’s own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that
past had been devalued” (193). Barry is here referring to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, who states that the first step for ‘colonialised’ people is to find a voice and identity to reclaim their own past. This statement represents a barrier and an issue for Karim in *BoS*. He is the offspring from a mixed marriage with a British, white mother and a father from Bombay or as he himself puts it “a new breed, which has emerged from two old histories” (Kureishi 3). Is there a place for this new breed in the setting described in the novel? The question considering what should count as being British and how the postcolonial situation has brought the need for changes in view of that spectrum, are issues that Morrison discusses in his book. According to Morrison, Kureishi himself has stated that "the cultural diversity of modern society – in every sense – means that new ways of thinking are required about both national and personal identity… For him likewise, a new concept of Britishness is needed based on inclusivity and plurality rather than parochialism and nostalgia” (62). Hence, in order to establish whether or not this lack of plurality and inclusivity exists in modern society, a society that sets the scene in *BoS*, evidence of this shortage will be searched for within the text, from a Marxist critic’s viewpoint. According to Barry, a Marxist critic “makes a division between the ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ content of literary work and then relate to the ‘covert’ subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes” (167). This basically means that *BoS* will be read and searched for hints that a hidden message is covered under the surface of the text. As mentioned above I have already questioned whether or not Kureishi’s use of humour could be viewed as an allegory to face up to oppressive class and race divisions. This allegory could therefore then be translated into what Barry calls ‘covert’ and in that sense used as a method using a Marxist critic’s view.

M.H. Abrams claims that Marxists generally view literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era” (149). Details of issues, which were responsible for shaping the face of Britain during the time displayed in *BoS*, will therefore be discussed later on.

With regards to applying the perspective of a postcolonial critic, Barry explains that one of the points a postcolonial critic questions is the treatment of cultural difference and diversity, which is examined in literature. Postcolonial critics also develop a perspective “whereby states of marginality, plurality and perceived ‘Otherness’ are seen as sources of energy and potential change” (Barry 199).
2.2 Carnevalesque

In the article: “Bakhtin’s ‘Carnivalesque’ in 1950s British Comedy”, Sobchak’s applies Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of ‘carnivalesque’ to a variety of comedies produced in Britain during the late forties and early fifties. They are all satiric comedies, which ridicule society, and the way its citizens are kept in place. However, the main theme of these films is how these ordinary people manage to reduce the ‘rulers’ “to blithering idiots in a series of comic assaults on the pillar of society” (Sobchack 180).

In the foundation of Bakhtin’s theory, ‘carnivalesque’, lies his process in applying the spirit of the Medieval Carnival to texts. Craig Brandist explains that Bakhtin reveals this in his study of the French novelist Rabelais called *in the work of François Rabelais and the Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*¹ and in his book *Problems of Dostoevskii's Poetics*². It is, according to Brandist, the collapse of the strict hierarchies Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance that Bakhtin concentrates on. Bakhtin believed that not only did these texts liberate the human spirit, but also routed towards profound social change. He meant that the free spirit of a carnival liberated an un-hierarchical structure; rich and poor celebrated together, without the constraints and norms of everyday life and social class. Although, according to Brandist, who quotes Rabelais “This conception is not, however able to become ideologically elaborated until the radical laughter of the square entered into the ‘world of great literature’”.

In a carnival atmosphere the fool has the focal point. “The crude and vulgar are enshrined. The fool reigns” (Sobchack 179). In *BoS* Karim as the protagonist and narrator has centre stage and tells the story. In a carnivalesque atmosphere he would, disguised as the fool, gain certain benefits, which would allow him to be more outspoken and truthful than in a constrained environment. Karim’s reliability as a narrator is backed up by direct speech between characters. Yet, his reliability is questioned throughout the novel. What could be seen, as excuses of telling the story the way it is told are two comments about his personality right at the end of the novel. His father accuses him of still being a liar after Karim tells him that he was not making fun of him, which he does and have done throughout the story. Before that Jamilla and Changez discuss Karim, who is to them unknowingly listening from behind the sofa. “‘He’s got tremendous personal problems, as you say quite rightly…” (Kureishi 276). On the whole, though, Karim would be classified as a fair narrator. The novel contains a

¹ Original title: *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul’tura srednevekov’ia i renessansa*

² Original title: *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*
mixture of what Barry refers to as “mimetic and diegetic” (231) text, bringing a balance of dialogues and telling or relating the story to the reader. The diegetic part of the text relates and gives a clear picture of true facts and events from an actual cultural perspective.

According to Morrison “contemporary fiction…needs to be read as a product of the cultural conditions from which it emerges” (7). He also states that Bakhtin’s way of showing the need for a new worldview in a historical and social sense, by looking from a historical perspective, using the Middle Ages as an example, provides “great shifts in perception” (37). The possibility to perceive whether or not similar reflections of change are visible in BoS will be explored.

Furthermore, Robert Stam writes that according to Bakhtin “it is only in the eyes of another culture that a foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly” (195). Bakhtin also says that the meeting of two cultures does not mean that each of the cultures should lose their identity; instead they should both retain their own unity whilst opening up towards the other culture in order to reciprocally develop. An example of this from the novel is the way in which Haroon introduces yoga to the British as a way of personal development, which is an old Indian custom.

Another aspect, which Bakhtin believed promoted changes, is the amplified laughter at the manners and characteristics that box individuals into their social groups. Bakhtin’s description of a world turned upside down in order to provoke laughter could also be applied to the way BoS uses satire and parody to promote its message, examples of which, will be revealed further on. As Sobchack argues “… the carnivalesque is the atmosphere of satire and parody. It aims at social change by uncovering the truth about the emperor’s new clothes…” (180).

The result of the carnevalesque theme in the films analysed in Sobchack’s article did not change anything. “They provided an opportunity for venting rage and frustration without any social or political effect” (184). This is comparable to a ‘real’ carnival atmosphere, where life returns to normal after the celebration is finished. The carnevalesque theme in BoS would therefore be assumed a similar ending, providing that the necessary ingredients are present.

2.3 Humour, Wit, Satire and Allegory

As previously mentioned, humour is prevalent throughout BoS. Whether or not it could be labelled an allegory, or covert, to the actual theme of the novel, will be questioned in this essay. To distinguish which type or types of humour are present in the text, a brief discussion of how humour can be defined follows here.
Abrams explains that *didactic literature* is a term given to works of literature, which are written in order to instruct or give out information to the reader. As the equivalent of *didactic literature*, the term *propagandist literature* is sometimes used. This labels literature, which is aimed to make readers react with regards to certain social, political or other issues discussed at the time of publication of the text. *Didactic literature* is usually applied in a manner that will provide pleasure to the audience. For instance, satire in its various forms is considered didactic, which in order to increase the effect, and force of its message uses various forms of allegory. As discussed previously, *The Independent on Sunday*’s blurb refers to *BoS* as “…one of the sharpest satires on race relations in this country…” If the satire used in the novel could be classified didactic will be discussed further on, which *satire* and *allegory* also will be. However, in order to present a background, the section on *humour* and *wit* will be presented before.

*Wit* and *humour* are both terms “designed to amuse or to excite mirth in the reader” (Abrams 218). Yet, there is a distinction. *Wit*, according to Abrams, once signalled the mental ability and quickness of a person; this term is still used today with the term ‘half-wit’. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was used “for the ability to develop brilliant, surprising and paradoxical figures of speech” (Abrams 219). Present use of the term is still based on this practise, although slightly developed into including: “a kind of verbal expression which is brief, deft, and intentionally contrived to produce a shock of comic surprise” (Abrams 219). In explaining the term, Abrams also refers to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who makes a distinction between ‘harmless wit’, which makes people laugh without spite, and ‘tendency wit’, which directs the laugh at a selective aim in a scornful and derogatory manner.

When people use wit in dialogue and compete with remarks in order to turn received statements to their advantage; it is according to Abrams referred to as *repartee*.

*Humour*, on the other hand does not only refer to the verbal or spoken word; it also refers to appearance and behaviour of an individual, according to Abrams. He explains that this stems back to the Elizabethan times playwright Ben Jonson, who based his comedy on the ancient physiological theory of the four humours. These were the four primary fluids: blood, phlegm (saliva), choler (or yellow bile), and melancholy (or black bile). It was said that the temperament or mixture of these fluids determined the characteristic and physical state of a person. Hence an imbalance of any of the four humours produced different personal attributes, which characteristics are still valid today: sanguine (cheerful), phlegmatic (calm), choleric (hot-tempered) and melancholic (unhappy). For instance in Jonson’s comedy of humours,
Abrams explains that each character who plays a major roll is distinguished by one of the four humours and hence is provided with an eccentricity that shapes that character (31).

The characters in BoS are mainly stereotypes; they are all representatives of the ‘typical’ individuals present in the society portrayed in the novel. In order to demonstrate their stereotypical behaviour the four humours presented above will be applied as a model and used as a mean of analysing them, and their role within the text. Despite the fact that this will not provide a complete picture of their stereotypical representation, it will however, provide an insight to the use of how any defects displayed in a character is used to promote humour.

For instance Haroon represents a sanguine character. He is Karim’s father, which in itself would be enough to represent sanguine, as representative for blood. He is also the cheerful, popular, round character, who uses his ethnic background to his advantage, when it suits him. Karim nicknames him ‘the Buddha of suburbia’ as a result of him starting to instruct yoga to the ‘middle-class, trendy’ people in the suburbs, who are desperate for any cultural wisdom (Kureishi 30-32).

Princess Jeeta, who marries Anwar and is originally from a warrior family in Pakistan, represents a phlegmatic character. Anwar and her are together stereotypically displayed as the shop owners of a corner shop, selling newspapers and groceries. She is unaware and not at all interested in things that go on around her. Karim usually asks her who the Foreign Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer is, questions to which she never knows the answer and has no ambition to find out either. Yet, during the story she quietly gains her independence and fulfils her ambitions to change their store around, whilst her husband Anwar is becoming agitated with matters such as marrying their daughter Jamila off.

Jamila represents a choleric character, she has “a PhD in physical retribution” (Kureishi 53), and once ran through the traffic to knock off a biker and pulled hair off his head after he had shouted “Eat shit, Pakis” (Kureishi 53).

Anwar, who grew up with Haroon in India and later travelled to Britain together with Karim’s dad, represents a melancholic character. However, Anwar’s representation does not become evident until after he forces his daughter Jamila into an arranged marriage, which has unfortunate consequences. He goes on a hunger strike in order to get his family to obey him.

Karim’s mum Margaret also represents a melancholic character. However, on the contrary to Anwar, Margaret is a victim and sad character in the beginning of the novel, where she is described as dull, boring and square. As a suppressed working mother, her main pleasure is nibbling on a walnut whip whilst watching sitcoms on TV. According to herself she is not “Indian enough…” (Kureishi 5) to be included in Haroon’s latest pleasure in
promoting his culture to the British. Yet, she transforms herself into a representative of a sanguine character towards the end of the story, when she has turned her former sad existence around to a happy life.

The distinction between **wit** and **humour** is not only that **wit** just refers to words, spoken or written, whilst **humour** also involves characters’ way of dressing, moving, etc. Abrams explains that **humour** is what Freud would categorise as a harmless form of the comic, whilst **wit** as discussed above can be present in both harmless and tendency form. Furthermore, if the audience is made to laugh at a person, not only because he is ridiculous, but also because the person is being ridiculed, it is called ‘tendency comedy’. In **satire** it is ‘tendency wit’ and ‘tendency comedy’, but not humour, that an author exploits (Abrams 220-221). According to John MacQueen **allegory** and **satire** are “intimately connected” (68). And by considering an allegory as satire and vice versa it is easier to understand an allegory:

An allegory is a narrative fiction in which the agents and actions and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived to make coherent sense on the “literal,” or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events (Abrams 4).

The main purpose for **satire** is to ridicule certain types of people, institutions, beliefs, etc. and hence alter the audience’s attitude and approach to these targets. In comparison with the **comic**, this has a main purpose in evoking laughs; satire uses laughs as arms against its target(s). Satire is far from a new method of communication. Abrams writes, “good English satire has been written in every period beginning with the Middle Ages” (189).

### 3. Background

In order to establish what targets **BoS** is aiming its variation of humour, satire and wit at, a brief description into which development and issues were topical in Britain during the period, portrayed in the novel follows here.

#### 3.1 Society

David Christopher writes that Britain has faced rapid social and cultural change since the 1950s. The collectivism, which represented the beginning of the decade, had been transformed into a society based on individualism and a pleasure-seeking ethic. After the war the population was fed up with shortages and queues: “they wanted fun and consumerism”
(Christopher 2). In BoS there is one passage which clearly pictures that this was still the case in the 1970s:

They were fanatical shoppers in our suburbs. Shopping was to them what the rumba and singing is to Brazilians. Saturday afternoons, when the streets were solid with white faces, was a carnival of consumerism as goods were ripped from shelves. And every year after Christmas, when the sales were about to begin, there’d be a queue of at least twenty idiots sleeping in the winter cold outside the big stores for two days before they opened, wrapped in blankets and lying in deckchairs (Kureishi 65).

It was not only goods, which could be ripped from their shelves on offer; holidays and cars, were now also available to ordinary British citizens. The quote above suggests that it was “white faces” who were out chasing bargains. There were however other groups in society, who also belonged and had changed the face of Britain.

3.2 Immigration

Jeremy Black writes that Britain ruled a quarter of the world’s population and a fifth of its landmass by the end of the 19th century. The largest empire in history had been created without any real preparation or support for it. Britain’s success, in expanding its territory globally, was partly due to their lack of interest in the power politics on the Continent, which absorbed their European neighbours.

The Empire had a different influence on the British citizens depending on which class they belonged to. For the upper and middle classes the new territory had a positive effect, in providing prestigious careers within the army and administration. The working class, Black states, felt mostly indifferent towards imperialism, despite efforts from the government in marketing campaigns for them. In spite of this, The Empire became a part of the British identity for many people.

Towards the end of the 19th century a political elite among native people throughout the Empire emerged, aspired by an uprising colonised British-educated middle class. They put pressure on Britain to decolonise, and after the Second World War the first phase of the disintegration of the remaining British Empire took place in Asia. India was the first colony to become independent in 1947, and by the end of the 80s only a handful of smaller islands, Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands and Hong Kong, which was returned to China 1997, remained of The Empire.
Following Britain’s retreat from their imperial commitments, domestic politics were affected by immigrants arriving in heavy numbers into Britain. Through the 1948 National Act all Commonwealth citizens and colonial subjects had been given the right to free entry to United Kingdom, without restrictions. Christopher explains that a multi-ethnic Britain with a plurality of identities and heritages has been created by the immigration of people from all over the former British Empire, bringing with them numerous languages and cultures. Throughout the 1950s, around 20,000 Commonwealth citizens from the West Indies, Pakistan, India, Africa and Hong Kong arrived every year to an almost exclusively white Britain. They had been invited and offered jobs because there was a shortage of manual labour, which was mainly in low-paid areas of work, such as transport, health and catering. 

Karim’s father Heron and his friend Anwar arrived from Bombay to London to study, just like Ghandi, though on the contrary to Ghandi they did not return to India with a good education. Karim’s father was from an affluent family in Bombay, who had socialised and mixed with the British upper classes in India, and he was very surprised to find British people performing lower-class jobs like sweeping the roads and other manual work. Until then, he had experienced them as arrogant individuals whom him and his friends played cricket against and always had to allow them to win.

All the immigrants that arrived were given permanent residence in Britain and most of the time they ended up in the poor areas of the cities like for instance the East End of London. This had an immediate effect on the white working-class population. Christopher explains that as immigration increased competition for work and housing grew, and race became a source of social conflict. In the mid 1960s this conflict heightened when there was a slowdown in economic growth. Immigration then became a controversial issue. In 1968 Conservative MP Enoch Powell warned that violence could be the result of uncontrolled immigration. As a result of his outspokenness Powell was sacked from the Shadow Cabinet, hated by the left and loved by the racists. Yet, his statement left a clear warning and was a true prediction of the increased polarisation in Britain during the 1970s. Throughout that decade racial tension increased in the cities. The National Front, a far-right political party was increasing in popularity and was for a short period the third largest party in British politics. It “had begun to openly provoke black communities and their supporters” (Christopher 11). In BoS they are among other incidents portrayed as the gang which attacked Changez, Jamilla’s arranged husband, under a railway bridge when he was walking through the rough and poor area of South London. After jumping out on him, calling him ‘Paki’, even though he was
Indian; “they planted their feet all over him and started to carve the initials of the National Front into his stomach with razor blades” (Kureishi 224).

Despite the introduction of legal reform for equal opportunities in mass media and many areas of the arts for both women and black people, their representation remained traditional. Blacks were frequently targets of stereotyping and racial jokes in popular television programmes, such as “Love Thy Neighbour” and “The Story of Rising Damp”. Karim was himself portrayed as the laughing stock in both the plays he performed in. As Mowgli in the Junglebook, he appeared on stage with hardly anything on, apart from a small cloth covering his private parts. He also had to cover himself from top to toe in brown make-up, because he was not actually ‘dark’ enough to portray Mowgli.

3.3 Youth Culture

Besides immigration there was another issue that affected the face of Britain. It was the baby boom that appeared after the war, which caused a sharp drop in the average age in Britain, creating a younger society. Christopher explains that the identification of ‘youth’ as a recognised group that enjoyed a different lifestyle to that of the older generation created a new culture. This was a developing new culture fuelled by full employment and financial independence for these youths. Records, hair styles and fashionable clothes were introduced to this new market of consumers. One noticeable sign of a different attitude in youths was visible in ‘Teddy Boys’, who appeared around 1953. They were “urban working-class gangs dressed in colourful suits” with a threatening and brutal behaviour (Christopher 4). Their activities were published in newspapers, which portrayed their behaviour as shocking, yet sold many papers and frightened people. There was also an increase in juvenile crime, which almost doubled in 1959 and “debates about the relationship between affluence and violence” were frequently discussed (Christopher 4). The sounds and lyrics of rock’n’roll music together with commercial television programmes often got the blame for this.

Changes in the law during the 1960s allowed more freedom for youths. With the legalising of homosexuality in 1967, they could now choose their own sexuality together with their own religions and politics. Karim himself was interested in both girls and boys.

As perfectly portrayed in BoS with the character Charlie, young musicians became cultural innovators, who influenced young people to copy their style; hence ‘pop’ culture was created. Yet, some young people declined the consumerism and promoted ideas for alternative politics and lifestyles. In replacement for the competitive, materialist Western society, they had a general belief that a new unified society could be created based on peace and co-
operation. This was promoted by an increasing number of higher educated young people, who had been taught to think critically about society and politics, and therefore raised the interest in subjects such as sociology (Christopher 8). The commune that Jamilla and Changez moved into represents this group of youths in the text. They have meetings and discuss everything in detail whether it being world peace or buying groceries. Christopher explains that other young people rejected both the lifestyle of consumerism and that of politics. Exotic spirituality and enlightenment was the attraction for them, which was offered by cheap overseas travel along the ‘hippy trail’ to India (9). Eva’s friends Carl and Marianne, who are the hosts to one of Haroon’s yoga sessions, after recently returning from an Indian trek, are in one way portraying them in the novel. They are however house owners in an affluent suburb and on their return from India their house had been decorated with various Indian ornaments. According to Carl: “there are two sorts of people in the world – those who have been to India and those who haven’t” (Kureishi 30).

During the 70s acts of vandalism occurred frequently and young vandals, skinheads and football hooligans were a threatening presence on the streets. The character who seems to represent part of this group in the text is Karim’s uncle Ted. He takes Karim to see a football game and on their way returning home from the game vandalises an underground railway carriage. Another group who emerged around Britain at this time was the punks, who were noticeable with their shocking appearance. They reflected a sense of antipathy towards a society, which had through forsaken its youth, turned its back on its future. The character Charlie, as discussed earlier, who did not have his own sound, literally jumps on the bandwagon and transforms himself into a punk, when he realises that this is the new sound.

4. Analysis of the Novel
The way Britain is described in the novel reflects an actual historic cultural and political development that did take place in the country during the depicted time. I read the novel as a fictive investigation into some social issues of the time. A discussion about how these social issues are reflected in the novel follows here.

4.1 Mixed Messages
Karim is, as he himself puts it, the offspring of two old cultures fused together. This fact presents a main theme within the novel, a theme that is communicated through various methods and symbols, all contributing to a mixed message of a sense of doubleness. This
juxtaposition symbolises these two old cultures coming together, but not necessarily mixing. For instance food is referred to and mentioned at various incidents, usually in connection with a drama. This is illustrated when Haroon has been unfaithful to his wife, he refuses to speak for a week and Karim reveals that “at supper we sat eating our curled-up beefburgers, chips and fish fingers in silence” (Kureishi 19). As a contrast to this traditional western food there is also the display of the traditional eastern food. When Anwar is hunger striking in order to get Jamilla to agree to marry the man he has arranged for her, Karim is eating a kebab and chapatti with green chillis and onions.

Karim’s passion for tea, which does not include any ordinary brew, is another example of a mixed message. He keeps various boxes of different teas in his bedroom, which he would mix in order “to concoct more original combos in [his] teapot” (Kureishi 62). This variation in taste is also marked in Karim’s sexual duality. He wants to sleep with boys and girls, and to be forced to choose one from the other would be heart breaking, “like having to decide between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones” (Kureishi 55).

Karim’s mixed inheritance could be seen as the root that these mixed messages in the text stem from the choice of eating western and eastern food. The point being that the action of eating is still taken place whether it is a drama effecting his east or west background. Bakhtin’s view that the meeting of two cultures should not mean that each of the cultures should lose their identity but instead opening up towards the other culture in order to reciprocally develop, which Karim’s actions exemplifies. He tries everything, but never at the same time. In the above examples it is only the teas that are truly mixed, resulting in original combinations, which in one sense contradicts Bakhtin’s view.

This sense of duality could also be interpreted as a fictive enactment of the wide choice of avenues that had opened up for youths, compared with the lack of choice the generations before had had. This new generation’s culture must, as Bakhtin stated about cultures, reveal itself fully and profoundly in the eyes of the older generation, which makes an interesting comparison to explore in a parallel to that of different cultures. As mentioned in section 3.3 above it was the sounds and lyrics of rock’n’roll music together with commercial television programmes that got the blame for the violence present in society. Both of these are new elements in society and exemplify this concept of new versus old. Furthermore, in the novel the attitude towards the youth culture and renewal of society is voiced differently through different characters in the novel. Anwar as a representative of a melancholic character is not prepared to alter his views, which will be discussed later on. He is also very suspicious of young people in the shop because according to him they are all shoplifters. Haroon and Eva
are both representatives of sanguine characters and are also accepting the new youth culture. They mix with young people, attend Charlie’s concerts and are open to changes. Covertly this could be read as a message that to achieve happiness you have to be open to and accept changes, which is a barrier too high for many.

4.2 Mixed Use of Wit and Humour

Ted and Jean never called Dad by his Indian name, Haroon Amir. He was always ‘Harry’ to them, and they spoke of him as Harry to other people. It was bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too. They’d called Dad Harry from the first time they’d met him, and there was nothing Dad could do about it. So he called them ‘Gin and Tonic’ (Kureishi 33).

One typical problem of the clash amongst different cultures is that it becomes difficult to identify with and accept obvious differences. The fact that many immigrants hold on to their traditional names, sounding different and foreign, thereby causing problems for the indigenous population, is portrayed very well in the above quote from the novel. It is also evident that it is only a select few who are incapable of using Haroon’s correct name. Furthermore, it becomes clear that Haroon is not really accepting the fact that his in-laws are too ignorant to acknowledge his real name. Had it not bothered him he could have called them anything; the fact that he emphasises and highlights their dependency to alcohol by nicknaming them ‘Gin and Tonic’ indicates his opposition. Yet, with the assistance of wit, humour and satire, Haroon’s resentment does not become as obvious, as if he had simply told them that he would have preferred not to be called Harry.

The wit is displayed in the use of wordplay and allusion; Jean sounds a bit like Gin and Ted begins with the same letter as tonic. Humour is displayed by highlighting Jean and Ted’s alcohol problem, which gives their personalities an imbalance and weakness. Although this is not as obvious as the examples above in Jonsson’s theory and use of humour, it still brings forward an imbalance in their personalities, which in this case makes them the laughingstock. Because their personal problem is highlighted and used in a comic manner it could also be said that it is in fact tendency wit, and therefore satire which is on display in this case, in order to amuse. As discussed above, satire uses laughs as arms against its target. The targets in this case are Haroon’s in-laws, who both belong to the British working class and are stereotypically portrayed as representatives of the mindset of many people from this class.
Covertly, Ted and Jean’s ignorance is portrayed as a denial to Haroon’s culture and background. By ignoring his real Indian name, they are also ignoring who he really is. This is also emphasised in the quote above with the sentence: “It was bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too.”

Ted and Jean are not always treated as a unit in the novel. On the one hand, Jean is the antagonist, with a negative aura constantly surrounding her. Ted on the other hand, provides Karim with an insight into typical ‘white’ things, which his father does not do, like fishing and football games. Ted’s display of hooliganism on the underground train, as discussed earlier, could be an act of release of the suppression caused by living with a person like Jean. Satirically that act could also target and laugh at the result of a ‘grown-up’ Teddy Boy. Since it is not only the name ‘Ted’, which bears a reminder of the old gang, but that could also explain his behaviour on the train, which was discussed earlier on in 3.3.

4.3 Mixed Cultures

The novel deals not only with issues concerning clashes with the white British against the immigrant population. It also brings up the question of old traditions against modern values. One example of this is when Anwar’s daughter Jamilla refuses to be involved in the marriage her father has arranged for her. When Karim visits them he gets the following explanation from Anwar, who is on a hunger strike in order to get his own way:

‘I won’t eat. I will die. If Gandhi could shove out the English from India by not eating, I can get my family to obey me exactly the same.

‘What do you want her to do?’

‘To marry the boy I have selected with my brother.’

‘But it’s old-fashioned, Uncle, out of date,’ I explained. ‘No one does that kind of thing now. They just marry the person they’re into, if they bother to get married at all.’

…”That’s not our way, boy. Our way is firm. She must do what I say or I will die. She will kill me’ (Kureishi 60).

When Karim asks Jamilla if he could tell his ‘white’ friend Helen what was going on, Jamilla says, “Yes, if you want to expose our culture as being ridiculous and our people as old-fashioned, extreme and narrow-minded” (Kureishi 71). According to Stam, Bakhtin said, “it is only in the eyes of another culture that a foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly” (195). An arranged marriage is the custom in many cultures. As many customs this is seen as
a natural procedure, which is not questioned until something else, an alternative is presented. Anwar’s method of imitating Ghandi in order to get his own way by hunger striking and almost dying in the process is an interesting way to portray how important this is for him. At the same time it portrays him as stubborn and set in his ways. He is not prepared to give up on certain principles, listening to his wife or show any concern for his daughter’s happiness.

In the end Jamilla agrees to marry Changez, “the man her father had selected from millions…” (82), who then arrives from India. However, it soon becomes apparent that Anwar’s future son-in-law has not turned out as Anwar had expected. His main aim with getting his daughter married had been to get someone to help him and his wife out in the shop, especially with the heavy workload. However, he had to hide his disappointment when he discovers that Changez has a crippled left arm without a proper hand, making him unable to carry boxes or to paint walls. He is also overweight, lazy and incapable, to the point that Karim reflects that “… had he four Mohammed Ali arms I doubted if he’d know what to do with a paintbrush, or with a toothbrush for that matter” (Kureishi 82).

This entire episode is a disappointment for Anwar. He is disappointed in his brother who had selected Changez, a cripple for his only daughter. He had hoped to get grandchildren, something, which does not materialise while he was still alive, and as a result he transforms into a melancholic character.

There is satire present both in Anwar’s behaviour and the outcome of this episode. His plot to stage a hunger strike in order to get his own way almost results in his own death. Yet his real purpose to sacrifice his daughter’s happiness does not pay off, since his son-in-law is both unable and unwilling to work for him. In the end, unlike in the quote above when he declares that his daughter will kill him if she does not obey his wishes, it is actually Changez, who accidentally kills him, when Anwar in a fury chases him and Changez in his defence hits him with a bag.

The target for the satire in this incident is Anwar and his absolute refusal to put his daughter’s wish for happiness before tradition. His stubbornness results in an unhappy marriage for his daughter and disappointment and unhappiness for himself, which in a rage of fury leads to his own death.

Humour is in this episode displayed in Changez’s appearance and mannerisms. He does not behave in a regular way and does not respond in an expected manner, which makes him a funny character. When Karim was ordered to find a ‘foreign’ character to act as in his second play, he based it on Changez, which the audience loved. “They laughed at my jokes, which concerned the sexual ambition and humiliation of an Indian in England” (Kureishi 220). The
fact that Karim wittily highlights his disability, appearance and lazy streak when he quietly compares him with Mohammed Ali, sums up Changez’s totally unsuitability and choice for a husband to Jamilla and a helper for Anwar. Covertly it could also be telling the reader that it is not a good way to choose a husband without actually seeing him first. Or in other words, an arranged marriage is not always a suitable option. Through this incident as it is portrayed in the novel, it also becomes an old custom which is criticised. Yet, allegorically disguised with the use of satire, wit and humour.

4.4 Mixed Aspects of Society
Karim, the young protagonist and narrator in the novel, describes himself as “restless and easily bored” (3). He does not know if this is an effect of being of mixed race, or as he says “belonging and not”, or if it is the effect of living in the suburbs (Kureishi 3). The suburbs where Karim lives are described as quiet, dull, and full of uninteresting people, familiar strangers. They are portrayed as dutiful servants, who routinely live their lives. A typical Sunday in an affluent suburb is described like:

…the men hovering, hosepiping, washing, polishing, shining, scraping, repainting, discussing and admiring their cars. It was a lovely day but their routine never changed. Women called out that dinner was on the table. People in hats and suits were coming back from church and they carried Bibles. The kids had clean faces and combed hair (Kureishi 39).

There is however a different description of an environment not as idyllic as portrayed above. Where Anwar lives with his family, which is an area closer to London and also a lot poorer.

It was full of neo-fascist groups, thugs who had their own pubs and clubs and shops. On Saturdays they’d be out in the High Street selling their newspapers and pamphlets. They also operated outside the schools and colleges and football grounds, like Millwall and Crystal Palace. At night they roamed the streets, beating Asians and shoving shit and burning rags through their letter-boxes. Frequently the mean, white, hating faces had public meetings and the Union Jacks were paraded through the streets, protected by the police (Kureishi 56).

This threatening environment motivates Jamilla to train hard in preparation for a forthcoming guerrilla war against the white. She wants to be certain to be ready to defend herself against
any attack on their part. At night her mother keeps buckets of water close to her bed in case the shop is firebombed.

Morrison states above that contemporary fiction should be read as a product of the cultural conditions from which it stems. As presented in 3.2, racial tension was a fact soon after the arrival of immigrants in Britain. They arrived from all over the former colonies; most of them ended up in poor suburbs where the working class population lived. These people lacked any knowledge of the immigrants’ culture and background and viewed them as threats to the few jobs and houses available. In TV and media immigrants were presented as the laughingstock, which Karim was up against in both of the plays he participated in.

Despite the serious issues presented fictional, which historically are proven as facts, humour does in the text put a filter on this hard reality about racial conflicts. After these reflections about Jamilla’s circumstances are presented, Karim discusses how Jamilla tried to recruit him to join her training, which ends with the following discussion:

‘Why do you have to start training at eight?’ I whined.
‘Cuba wasn’t won by getting up late, was it? Fidel and Che didn’t get up at two in the afternoon, did they? They didn’t even have time to shave!’
(Kureishi 56).

Jamilla’s have used tendency wit, combining laughter at Karim’s laziness at the same time as she covertly brings forward a suggestion of a revolution by using Cuba as an example.

The people in the more affluent suburb are on the other hand obsessed with only few matters, one, of which is to do their houses up. Karim’s neighbour’s houses are described as follows:

One had a new porch, another double-glazing, ‘Georgian’ windows or a new door with brass fittings. Kitchens had been extended, lofts converted, walls removed, garages inserted. This was the English passion, not for self-improvement or culture or wit, but for DIY, Do It Yourself, for bigger and better houses with more mods, the painstaking accumulation of comfort and, with it, status – the concrete display of earned cash. Display was the game (Kureishi 74-75).

This obsession is not only present in the above quote, but is repeated in various ways with the same message through the novel. The environment and surroundings in which we live are more important than the personal development within. Haroon is completely disinterested in this activity, and his thoughts on this obsession can be viewed when he asks his sister-in-law
Jean if she lives in a Hindu temple after she demands that everyone leaves their shoes at the door. He then uses a piece of tendency wit when he asks, “Is it the shoeless meeting the legless” (Kureishi 41).

There are plenty of incidents when the white members of society call immigrants by names and act generally degrading towards them. One example is from one of Haroon’s first yoga sessions at Eva’s, his future mistress’ house. There are for instance two men, who have the following repartee once they realise their usual ‘piss-up’ has been replaced by a yoga-session:

‘Why has Eva brought this brown Indian here? Aren’t we going to get pissed?’
‘He’s going to give us a demonstration of the mystic arts!’
‘And has he got his camel parked outside?’
‘No, he came on a magic carpet.’
‘Cyril Lord or Debenhams?’ (Kureishi 12).

In the same manner as Sobchack has used Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of “carnivalesque” to analyse his report, this theory could also be applied to BoS. Its message of amplifying laughter at the manners and characteristics that box individuals into their social groups is very obvious in BoS, as the above exemplifies. These quotes provide examples of the stereotypical mindset of the citizens in the suburbs, their passion for improving their homes and cars in contrast to their ignorance for “self-improvement or culture”.

Bakhtin also suggests that texts could promote social change and liberate the human spirit; covertly there is a message in the text. The way, in which BoS presents its message not only with the use of humour, wit and satire but also with its outspokenness, leads to an effect similar, though opposite, to the theme of the emperor without any clothes. The British obsession with exterior and tangible matters does not hide the ignorance of their uncultured minds. This critique against the English is also voiced from the Americans, who, when the English theatre group is celebrating its success in New York utters: “These English are animals. Their whole culture has fallen through the floor”” (Kureishi 245).

4.5 ‘Otherness’ as Sources of Energy and Potential Change

Karim introduces himself as a mixture from two old cultures. The manner, in which he tells the story, being the narrator, it appears that he views himself as belonging more to his father’s culture than to his mother’s. When Karim appears in his second play, once again as an Indian,
his white mother reminds him that he has never been to India and that she is in fact his mother.

‘Wasn’t I good, eh, Mum?’

‘You weren’t in a loin-cloth as usual,’ she said. ‘At least they let you wear your own clothes. But you’re not an Indian. You’ve never been to India. You’d get diarrhoea the minute you stepped off that plane, I know you would.’

‘Why don’t you say it a bit louder,’ I said. ‘Aren’t I part Indian?’

‘What about me?’ Mum said ‘Who gave birth to you? You’re an Englishman, I’m glad to say.’…(Kureishi 232).

Interestingly his younger brother has more of a neutral view on race and who he is. His thoughts are that everyone should just get on with their lives without feeling sorry for themselves. (Karim and him) are lucky really, they have no reason to be bitter like the blacks, because they have not got a history of slavery and they should be grateful for not having white skin, which he does not like the look of. He tells his bigger brother: “we can’t pretend we’re some kind of shitted-on oppressed people. Let’s just make the best of ourselves”’ (Kureishi 268).

Haroon, their father has done just that. His way of finding himself and leading the path for others to do the same is the real message of this novel. This states that different cultures can be a source for each other. When Jamila wants advice on how Haroon could help her to convince her father to forget about the arranged marriage, he says the following:

‘I believe happiness is only possible if you follow your feeling, your intuition, your real desires. Only unhappiness is gained by acting in accordance with duty, or obligation, or guilt, or the desire to please others. You must accept happiness when you can, not selfishly, but remembering you are part of the world, of others, not separate from them. Should people pursue their own happiness at the expense of others? Or should they be unhappy so others can be happy? …’So if you punish yourself through self-denial in the puritan way, in the English Christian way, there will only be resentment and more unhappiness… People ask for advice all the time. They ask for advice when they should try to be more aware of what is happening’ (Kureishi 76-77).

The characters in the novel, who act upon this advice, no matter which ethnic group they belong to, are also portrayed as happy individuals. Haroon’s popularity and success also tells a story that there are many unhappy, lost people in Britain, presumably with a sense of not belonging or knowing where to belong.
5 Conclusion

The juxtaposition of messages delivered in the novel tells the reader that Britain consists of a mixture where everything is moving, and nothing is set in stone. Historical events have transformed the shape of the country, making it crucial to look upon it in new ways. Characters who are prepared to move with these movements and are open to changes are portrayed as sanguine individuals, who live happily together learning from each other whilst spreading positive signals. On the other hand there are characters portrayed as ignorant with a total inability to develop and change. They are portrayed as melancholic characters and have a miserable existence sending negative vibes within their surroundings. Representatives of these two poles are irrespective of ethnic background. It is their perception of the world that decides to which pole they belong.

Anwar and Jean are both set in their ways, traditional and forceful in their manners. Their lives are miserable and they have a negative effect on their respective surroundings. In Jean’s case she is portrayed as a representative of the British working class, who believes that exterior display and keeping up with the latest cons should go before personal enhancement. The fact that she is an alcoholic proves the inaccuracy in her reasoning. Her ignorance and incapability in accepting anything different is highlighted in the inability to call her brother-in-law by his real Indian name.

In Anwar’s case his melancholic humour was brought upon him when he insisted on applying the old custom from his culture in arranging a marriage for his only daughter. The message of this theme in the novel clearly shows how an old cultural custom is not always for the best. Hence it is advising the British to review their old cultural customs, of which appears to be absent in their present day society.

The ‘white’ British have insufficient time to explore any cultural sides of their existence. Consequently, they are portrayed as being obsessed by consumerism and home improvement: they are absorbed by a capitalistic mindset. Although the theme of the novel is here portraying the fact that things are indeed changing, the exterior of people and their houses are being developed but not the actual individual. Haroon discovers that the British lack of individual fulfilment and the need for him to help them find themselves, becomes a full-time job for him.

By using Bakhtin’s theory of carnevalesque it is clear that BoS is promoting a message that a change in attitude towards race and Britishness is required. It also sends a clear message
that otherness and its culture should be recognised as a positive source and that the majority culture should open up towards minority culture for mutual development.

The prevalent use of humour, wit and satire, which works as an attack on selected targets irrespective of ethnic background runs as a main theme throughout the novel. Karim, the protagonist, provides the role as ‘the fool’, which as in Bakhtin’s carnevallesque rules during the Carnival, or in this case the novel. This role allows him to introduce matters to the reader that would under normal circumstances not be discussed. Many of the sensitive issues that are brought up in the story are disguised or filtered with satire or wit as an allegorical veil. They are covert messages, which are there to be discovered. Either expressed quickly and wittily or embedded between humorous or satiric remarks. The consequence of its effect does support my thesis that humour provides a justifiable forum for the critique and presentation of society, enabling the facilitation of serious, effective and powerful perspectives. Facts presented simultaneous with a mix of humour and wit provides a method of sharp attacks towards the attended target. The result presents an issue from a different perspective and therefore focuses the target from an altered attitude.

However, just like in Sobchack’s article about British film comedies, in BoS there are no obvious changes that in the end do take place, providing any results of change. The last line in the novel does provide hope for Karim, but could also be interpreted into a message for the reader. “… I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but it wouldn’t always be that way” (Kureishi 284).
6 References

Books:

Article:

Internet: