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MASTER'S THESIS

FROM POST-SUBCULTURE TO
CYBERCULTURE: COLLECTIVE IDENTITY
FORMATION IN GAUTAM MALKANI'S
NOVELS

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ÖZ

POST-ALTKÜLTÜRDEN SİBERKÜLTÜRE: GAUTAM MALKANI ROMANLARINDA KOLLEKTİF KİMLİK OLUŞUMU

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Bu tezin amacı Gautam Malkani'nin **Londonstani** (2006) ve **Distortion** (2018) isimli romanlarında post-alkültürel ve siberkültürel kimliklerin temsillerini incelemektir. Malkani'nin romanlarının yakın okuması aracılığıyla, kültürel aidiyet ve gençlik kültürleri söylemlerinin yirmi birinci yüzyılın başından itibaren sosyo-politik faktörlere bağlı olarak ve medyanın artan etkisi altında nasıl değiştiğini ve geliştiğini göstermek hedeflenmektedir. Çalışma, post-alkültür ve siber-kültür teorileri çerçevesinde, romanların hem post-alkültür hem de siber-kültür toplulukları arasındaki sembolik etkileşim alanlarını haritalandıracaktır. Malkani'nin romanlarında gösterdiği gibi, kültürel kimlik ve sosyal topluluklar söylemi, "siber uzay" olarak adlandırılan yeni bir sosyal alanın açılmasıyla birlikte bir değişime uğrar. Siber uzay, çevrimiçi alternatif yaşamlara birden çok pencere açar ve insanların çok sayıda kimliği aynı anda keşfetmesine olanak tanır. Bu dijital bağlamda, tüketimcilik, performatiflik ve bireycilik gibi post-alkültürel davranış kalıpları genişler, gelişir ve gelişmek için yeni ortamlar bulur. Bu tez post-alkültürel ve siberkültürel kimliklerin oluşumu için gerekli olan sembollerin başkalaşarak çoğalmasının gerekliliğini vurgulayarak, bu gelişmeyi tanımlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik problemi, Kültürel aidiyet, Altkültür, Post-Altkültür, Siberkültür

ABSTRACT

FROM POST-SUBCULTURE TO CYBERCULTURE: COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FORMATION IN GAUTAM MALKANI'S NOVELS

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The purpose of this thesis is to examine the representations of subcultural and cybercultural identities in Gautam Malkani's novels, **Londonstani** (2006) and **Distortion** (2018). Through a close reading of Malkani's novels, it aims to illustrate how the discourses of cultural belonging and youth cultures have changed and evolved since the beginning of the twenty-first century in relation to socio-political factors and under the increasing influence of media. In the framework of post-subcultural and cybercultural theories, the study will map out the novels' terrains of symbolic interactionism among both post-subcultural and cybercultural communities. As Malkani illustrates in his novels, the discourse of cultural identity and social communities undergo a shift with the opening of a new social space, often referred to as "cyberspace." Cyberspace opens multiple windows to alternative lives online and allows people to explore a multiplicity of identity. In this digital context, post-subcultural behaviour patterns, such as consumerism, performativity and individualism, expand, evolve and find new mediums to thrive. This thesis will aim to describe that evolution, looking at how the modification and multiplication of symbols are essential to the formation of post-subcultural and cybercultural identities.

Keywords: Identity, Cultural belonging, Subculture, Post-Subculture, Cyberculture

PREFACE

This thesis provides an analysis of Gautam Malkani's two novels, **Londonstani** and **Distortion**, and illustrates the changing dynamics of cultural identities and collective formations in the framework of subcultural, post-subcultural and cybercultural theories. It offers a comprehensive look at the post-war youth cultures and maps out the ways the cultural identity formations have transformed over time. It examines the impacts of technological developments and media on these transformations.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCCS	: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies
CCRU	: Cybernetic Culture Research Unit
MIT	: Massachusetts Institute of Technology



INTRODUCTION

In his article entitled “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall states that “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything else which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (1990, 225). This thesis is closely linked with Hall’s assertion that cultural identities are never stable and constantly change in relation to various political, economic and social factors. Through an analysis of Gautam Malkani’s two novels, **Londonstani** and **Distortion**, this study aims to illustrate how cultural identities and youth cultures are formed and the ways they are expressed via symbols and signs.

Clarke et. al., define the term “culture” as “the way, the forms, in which groups ‘handle’ the raw material of their social and material existence” (11). Culture, then, is the structure and construct of social relations collectively produced by a group of people. Cultures not only shape the ways groups interact with others, but they also play a defining role in the ways individuals understand and interpret the outside world. But, as is the case with any groups and communities, there is a tendency to rank and categorize cultures, in order to determine their position in relation to “*the* dominant culture” (Clark et. al., 11-12). Examples of such categorization include class cultures, youth cultures and subcultures representing subordinate groups.

Art, in the form of literature, has offered valuable insights into the formation of cultural identities across different time periods. Representations of cultural identity formation in novels date back to the earliest examples of the genre. For instance, **Don Quijote**, by the 17th-century Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes, is often considered to be the earliest example of a modern novel (Bloom, “The Knight in the Mirror”). Cervantes’s work features a middle-aged man named Alonso Quijano, who constructs his identity based on the chivalric ideals depicted in the books he obsessively reads. He embarks on a quest to become a knight-errant himself, adopting the name Don Quijote. However, his perception of reality becomes distorted as he confuses the imaginative world of chivalric romances with the mundane reality around him.

In both of the novels analyzed in this thesis, we see characters mold their identities around the media they consume, similar to Don Quijote’s influence from

chivalric romances. As such, an individual's struggle to identify with a certain group of people is not confined to contemporary times. Collectively constructed "maps of meaning," (Clarke et. al., 11) continue to exist, although in ever-evolving forms, and often manifest as symbols and signs that individuals are exposed to throughout their lives. This thesis will show that, much like Don Quijote's reliance on his iconic helmet, horse and armour, shared symbols within certain societal groups play a major role in the intricate process of cultural identity construction. It is also important to acknowledge that **Don Quijote** satirizes the romanticized ideals of chivalry and the societal norms of Cervantes's time, providing a critical lens on the construction of cultural identity. Similarly, through their narratives, both novels analyzed in this thesis provide social critiques concerning the youth cultures and the societies in which they were produced.

In times and places characterized by significant cultural shifts, literary fiction serves as a reflection of these transformative dynamics. Britain after two world wars underwent massive socio-cultural changes which led to the emergence of new cultural identities and youth groups (Clarke et. al., 17). The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham was established in 1968, amidst this complex environment, with a primary focus on the emerging cultural patterns in Britain. Clarke and his colleagues explain the growing public recognition of youth cultures during this period as follows:

'Youth' appeared as an emergent category in post-war Britain, one of the most striking and visible manifestations of social change in the period. 'Youth' provided the focus for official reports, pieces of legislation, official interventions. It was signified as a social problem by the moral guardians of the society—something we 'ought to do something about'. Above all, Youth played an important role as a cornerstone in the construction of understandings, interpretations and quasi-explanations about the period. (Clarke et. al., 9)

In other words, during this period, youth cultures found themselves marginalized and on the periphery of social acceptance. Garnering significant attention from society, youth cultures triggered what British sociologist Stanley Cohen referred to as "moral panics" (5). In his comprehensive study titled, **Folk Devils and Moral Panics** (1972), Cohen explores how the media amplifies outrage or paranoia about youth cultures. He illustrates the ways media tends to distort the intended message of these youth groups and magnify their violent actions, effectively casting them as "folk devils."

It is important to note that youth cultures in this period were distinct from adult communities, in that they were not united around familial or traditional bonds. Instead, they emerged as an upheaval against the dominant culture. Subsequently, they were positioned as subordinate “along the scale of cultural power” (Clarke et. al., 11). For this reason, they were referred to as subcultures. As Thornton states “subcultures ... have come to designate social groups which are perceived to deviate from the normative ideals of adult communities” (Thornton, 1997: 2).

After the 1950s, with the heightened visibility of youth subcultures, these collective formations began to be represented and articulated in literary fiction. Alan Sillitoe’s novel **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** (1958) is one of the first examples of literary fiction that depicts an emergent form of youth culture in post-war Britain. The novel’s protagonist Arthur Seaton and his friend Fred epitomize a working-class youth that is rebellious, non-conforming and often violent. As Nick Bentley observes, Sillitoe’s characters “are firmly ensconced within a working-class culture and thoroughly reject, whether through choice or necessity, the moral, ethical and cultural codes imposed upon them by dominant society” (202). Arthur and Fred find a sense of communal solidarity in their friendship. They perceive their acts of vandalism as expressive demonstrations of their anger and alienation from society.

Another novel that captures the changing face of youth and society is Colin MacInnes’s, **Absolute Beginners** (1959) which “offers a diverse representation of identifying multiple subcultures within the term youth” (Bentley, 2003: n.p.). The novel includes the emerging Teddy Boy youth subculture, represented by the character Ed the Ted. The Teddy Boy subculture was characterized by its working-class roots and distinctive fashion consisting of long, “Edwardian jackets and drainpipe trousers [which] was configured by the media as symbolic of a ‘new’ form of vicious delinquency” (Osgerby, 2014: 5-6), in 1950s. MacInnes’s narrative also explores the influence of jazz music and the impact of West Indian immigrants on the youth scene of the time. Stuart Hall describes **Absolute Beginners** as a “distinguished piece of social documentary” (2021, 37) that takes the reader “on a tour of ‘modern’ attitudes” (2021, 38) among youth, in post-war Britain.

The Teddy Boy subculture was followed by the Mods, who increased public alarm by reassigning meanings to ordinary objects such as motor scooters, metal

combs and parkas, transforming them into “menacing symbol[s] of group solidarity” (Cohen, 1980: 104). The Mods’ extensive use of symbolic objects stirred concern among people and media. As Osgerby states:

By the early 1960s the Teddy boy’s drape- suits and brothel-creeper shoes had been displaced by the chic, Italian-inspired fashions associated with the mods; but mod style was also a focus for concern. Like the Teddy boys before them, the mods’ appearance was often presented by the media as a symbol of national decline. (2014: 6)

In this way, Mod style and the symbolic objects they utilized amplified societal anxieties. Alan Fletcher’s novel **Quadrophenia** (1979) takes place in 1964 and vividly portrays the Mod movement within the working-class British youth culture. The central character, seventeen-year-old Jimmy Cooper, serves as the protagonist who yearns for a sense of belonging within the Mod subculture. He navigates the challenges of forming a subcultural identity while being scrutinized by society at large.

By the 1960s, the Mod emphasis on fashion items and affluence led their style to become highly commercialized. As Hebdige states, the Mod appearance started to be dictated “from above instead of being spontaneously created from within” (1993: 94). This resulted in ideological conflict within the Mod community between a group calling themselves the Traditional Mods and the Mods, who were mostly interested in commercialized music and fashion. The latter group, namely the “more extravagant Mods[,] ... began merging into the fashion-conscious hippies” (Cohen, 1972: 229). Meanwhile, the so-called Traditional Mods evolved into a new working-class subculture called the Skinheads (Hebdige, 1979: 55). This splinter group tried to de-commercialize the movement by turning to a more practical style that consisted of jeans, work boots with a short haircut. Phil Cohen explains that while “the mods explored the upwardly mobile option, the skinheads explored the lumpen,” (1972: 72) a term that refers to members of the working class unmotivated by the prospect of social mobility and disinterested in politics. Rather, the Skinhead movement emerged as a reaction to the image of the “affluent worker” exemplified by Teddy Boys and Mods (Clarke et. al., 21). Instead, Skinheads found solidarity in a simple uniform rather than relying on indicate fashion choices to display their subcultural identity.

Richard Allen gained notable recognition for his extensive collection of novels about Skinheads, which he wrote during the 1970s when the subculture was at its peak.

Allen's fiction resonated strongly with the young audience of that era, enjoying significant commercial success (Turner-Graham, 112). However, in over a dozen novels, he painted a rather shallow picture of the Skinhead subculture that aligned with the media representation of Skinheads. Bentley states that "Allen's style across all his works was to emphasize the violent aspects of subcultural practice and his novels tended to be lurid, soft porn entertainment that fed into moral panics about youth behaviours" (2018, 50-51). Moreover, some critics pointed out that Allen's portrayal of one-dimensional, violent and anti-immigrant characters may have played a role in the resurgence of racism within the Skinhead subculture during the late 1970s (Marshall, 56).

On the other hand, John King's novel **Skinheads** (2008) takes a different approach. King weaves together a narrative that encompasses flashbacks to the 1960s and 1980s and delves into the complexities and changes that have occurred over time, highlighting the evolution of the subculture and the varying interests and ideologies within its members.

Therefore, subcultural fiction emerged in post-war Britain and reflected the increasing visibility of diverse subcultures of the period. These literary works provided a platform for exploring the social, cultural, and political dimensions of youth cultures, and in doing so, they both reflected and influenced the subcultural movements.

Over time, youth cultures have continuously evolved and transformed, adapting to the ever-changing world around them. The 1990s marked a significant shift characterized by the rise of consumerism, mediatization, and the commercialization of subcultures. This shift blurred the boundaries between mainstream culture and subcultures, giving rise to a new term: post-subculture.

Post-subculture refers to the newly emerging, self-aware youth cultures that are distinct from early working-class subcultures, like Teddy Boys, Mods, and Skinheads. In their joint study, **The Post-Subcultures Reader** (2002), Weinzierl and Muggleton state that "the era seems long gone of working-class youth subcultures 'heroically' resisting subordination through 'semiotic guerrilla warfare'" (4). Consequently, both youth cultures and the fictional works reflecting the experiences and perspectives of these youth formations shifted away from modernist concerns towards a more fluid, fragmented and postmodern approach.

In Gautam Malkani's novel **Londonstani**, for instance, the desi rudeboys in London represent a youth culture that emerged within this changing environment. Unlike the characters portrayed in the aforementioned subcultural novels, Gautam Malkani's characters do not come from a working-class background, and their process of identity formation is not centred around political upheaval or class struggle. Instead, their desi rudeboy identity is closely tied to hyper-masculine gender performativity and shared consumption patterns, influenced by the media they consume.

Throughout the novel, the characters frequently draw connections between their group and earlier ethnicity-based subcultural formations, such as the Jamaican "rude boy" subculture. Although the desi rudeboys claim that their identity is deeply tied to their desi ethnicity and promote of their group as a rebellious response against societal marginalization because of their ethnicity, Malkani makes it clear that they do not face actual social exclusion or marginalization. Their claims of being victims of discrimination are insincere. By making this claim, they often attempt to rationalize their violent behaviour and seek to differentiate themselves from the rest of the society to establish a sense of superiority. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that the members of the desi rudeboy post-subculture are primarily driven by a desire to attain social status and power. In this respect, they distort the meaning of earlier youth subcultures which originally emerged as subversive formations against a hegemonic society that marginalized them. This distortion signifies a defeat for early youth cultures. They have been eclipsed by post-subcultures, represented by the desi rudeboys, who prioritize individualistic ambitions and the acquisition of power over group-solidarity. The post-subcultural elements exhibited by the desi rudeboy youth formation in **Londonstani** will be further explored in this study.

As Osgerby states "Constant change and flux have been endemic to the universe of youth subcultures. Styles have continually developed over time making sense in different ways for different groups of youngsters at different historical moments" (1998: 76). The rise of the Internet as a social space has brought about a significant transformation in youth culture, as illustrated in Gautam Malkani's second novel, **Distortion**. The novel's narrative depicts an individual's search for belonging in virtual space and illustrates the ways this struggle blurs the boundaries between offline and online realities. **Distortion**'s protagonist, Dhilan, creates multiple

personalities in cyberspace and, using these identities, he participates in Internet forums and online communities in search of a sense of belonging. As we will see, Dhilan's search for identity bears similarities to the identity formation of Jas, as both characters rely on performativity and symbols to constitute their identity. However, Dhilan's reliance on symbols that belong to cyberspace to understand the physical world, leads him to lose touch with reality and renders him unable to engage in meaningful communications.

This thesis is divided into three parts, with the first part consisting of three subchapters that provide a theoretical background on cultural identity formation and youth cultures. The first subchapter traces the origins of subculture theory and describes early working-class subcultures. The second subchapter examines the transition from subcultures to post-subcultures in the late 1990s, highlighting the social factors that contributed to this shift and the distinction between subcultural and post-subcultural theory. Finally, the third subchapter introduces the emergence of cybercultural studies, emphasizing how the post-subcultural elements were amplified with the emergence of cyberspace.

The second chapter analyses Gautam Malkani's novel **Londonstani** and is divided into two subchapters. The first subchapter examines the post-subcultural elements of performativity and hyper-individualism portrayed by the characters. It delves into how the characters use their appearances and conform to shared patterns of consumption to establish a sense of identity and status within their social circle. The second part analyses the use of symbols in **Londonstani**. It explains how symbolic objects used by the members of the desi subcultures lose their original meanings and are being utilized for the sake of obtaining power within the desi rudeboys' social sphere.

The third chapter examines Malkani's second novel **Distortion**, focusing on its cybercultural elements. The first subchapter of the third chapter analyses the multiplicity and fragmentation of the protagonist's sense of self in cyberspace. It also illustrates the ways this fragmentation distorts the protagonist's sense of reality. The second subchapter maps out the evolution of symbols in cyberspace and analyses how they foster addiction among users and contribute to the blurring of boundaries between the physical and virtual worlds.

The conclusion compares and contrasts Malkani's two novels, illustrating how societal changes and technological developments influence cultural identity formations. It traces out the heightened presence of post-subcultural elements, such as hyper-individualism, identity fragmentation, and the blurring of reality within cyberspace. In this sense, the conclusion highlights the importance of Malkani's novels as social documentaries that represent contemporary cultural formations in Britain.



CHAPTER ONE

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FORMATION AND YOUTH CULTURES: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

1.1. Subcultural Studies

Since it was first coined in the early twentieth century, the term “subculture” has referred to a group of people who distinguish themselves from the rest of society by acknowledging their shared interests, values and lifestyles (Blackman, 498-499). Because the prefix “sub” donates a subordinate or inferior position to the noun that it precedes, subcultural formations “have been considered beneath, but within, ‘society’ or ‘culture’, both of which relate to the social status of their participants” (Thornton, 1997: 4). Scholars of subcultural studies often emphasize that subcultural groups emerge as collective responses, either to a sense of exclusion from society or to socio-political and economic difficulties that they experience. As J. Patrick Williams writes, “when groups that are somehow limited in their access to dominant cultural resources try to collectively solve their problems by alternative methods, a subculture is likely to emerge” (5). For this reason, research into subcultures focuses on the constraints and challenges faced by groups that compose these collective formations.

Subcultural theory was initially developed in the 1920s, by the members of the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago - later referred to as “The Chicago School.” Their research looked at the connection between socio-economic problems and criminal behaviour within juvenile gangs in the US (Osgerby, 2014: 2-3). The scholars of the Chicago School studied problems stemming from rapid urbanization by utilizing an ethnographic perspective, trying to identify behavioural patterns expressed by groups of petty criminals. Namely, the joint study of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, prominent voices of the Chicago School, entitled **The City** (1925), provides ethnographic maps to understand group formations in the city of Chicago. Park and Burgess discovered in their research that scarcity of space and resources brought on by urbanization drove young people to engage in group formation and fight each other for control of parts of the city. This behaviour sometimes involved deadly violence, but the bonds between the people doing it took on characteristics of a culture, albeit one considered to be beneath the standards of society. In his influential study,

Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang (1955), A. K. Cohen argues that some young individuals who cannot attain social status through conventional means adopt alternative lifestyles and reject societal norms. Cohen's study played an important role in popularizing the term "subculture" among scholars of youth studies (Williams, 7-8) He used this term to describe how young people facing similar challenges form social groups with their own distinct values, codes, and behaviours that often contradict those of mainstream society.

In Britain, subcultures also emerged in response to the socio-cultural changes and challenges faced by young people. One of the main factors of the socio-cultural change was the increase in racial and ethnic diversity in Britain. After World War II, Britain was desperately in need of workers to rebuild its cities, demolished by German bombardment (Flinn, 27). Trying to solve the labour shortage, parliament passed the British Nationality Act in 1948, which recognized all people in British Empire as British citizens (Hansen, 67). The first post-war migrants, including many who had fought to defend Britain during the war, moved there by the thousands for jobs and a chance to help rebuild its shattered cities. As Phil Cohen points out, this new diversity of languages and skin colours was particularly visible in working-class neighborhoods:

The fifties saw the development of new towns and large estates on the outskirts of east London (Dagenham, Greenleigh and so on), and a large number of families from the worst slums of the East End were rehoused in this way. The East End, one of the highest-density areas in London, underwent a gradual depopulation. But as it did so, certain areas underwent a repopulation as they were rapidly colonized by a large influx of West Indians and Pakistanis. (66)

While immigrant families brought their culture and music with them to the East End of London, which later influenced the working-class subcultural formations, local working-class families started to move out into the outer rings of the city for more desirable housing. In order to prevent residents from gradually abandoning the city, "the planning authorities [...] concentrated on building new estates on slum sites within the East End" (Cohen, 1980: 66). However, these new estates consisted of prefabricated blocks, called council housing, that lacked the community spaces of their neighborhoods before the war. Consequently, the reconstruction plan led to feelings of alienation and imprisonment for families living there. According to the scholars of

the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the University of Birmingham, that was the context for the development of early subcultures in Britain.

Phil Cohen, who is one of the prominent scholars of the CCCS School, believes that early working-class subcultures were formed in reaction and opposition to this sense of estrangement. According to Cohen, the members of early working-class subcultures essentially aimed to bring back “the solidarities of the traditional neighborhood, destroyed by redevelopment” (73). The subcultural reaction was neither conveyed through protests, nor was it verbal. As Phil Cohen famously wrote, subcultural identities were “magically” expressed through shared symbols, in forms of dress, music and argot (70-72).

The CCCS Scholars employed a Marxist framework in their centrepiece **Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain** (1976) depicting subcultural identification and youth cultures as political reactions to the prevailing sense of detachment and loss of identity in post-war Britain. They believed that “youth culture must be understood as a response to the problems posed by a framework of bourgeois institutions” (Corrigan and Frith, 236). Furthermore, according to the CCCS, subcultures emerged as a way to find a consensus between the values of their “parent culture,”¹ including loyalty, community engagement and traditional working-class lifestyle, and the new cultural practices that were emerging, such as ostentatious displays of affluence, evolving fashion trends among working-class youth, and the influence of new musical genres.

An exemplary case they examine is that of the Mods, a subcultural community who aimed to find a balance between the newly arrived culture of West Indian immigrants and the predominant parent culture. As Hebdige states, “the Mods were the first in a long line of working-class youth cultures which grew up around the West Indians, responded positively to their presence and sought to emulate their style” (51). The Mods and the West Indian immigrants who resided and worked in the same neighbourhoods, were able to interact through art, in the form of music. The Mods embraced Jamaican reggae and ska music, which was often produced by the West

¹Phil Cohen uses the term “parent culture” as a counter to “youth culture,” stating that the “outcome of generational conflict was the emergence of specific youth subcultures in opposition to the parent culture” (1980: 56).

Indian community in Britain itself (Stratton, 14). As such, the Mods acted as a bridge to bring together the cultural gap between the West Indian immigrants and their traditional parent culture. In the process a new subculture was formed.

Thus, the Chicago School and CCCS both recognized subcultural formations not only as a way of dealing with the socio-cultural climate of their time but also as significant political responses. For these institutions, as Thornton states, “the idea of collective problem solving became one of the cornerstones of subcultural theory” (1997: 13). However, as the face of youth cultures continued to transform over time, it became evident that a new theoretical approach was necessary to comprehend the complexities of contemporary youth cultures.

1.2. The Post-Subcultural Turn

The origin of post-subcultural theory reaches back to the “Post-Subcultural Studies: New Post-Subcultural Formations within Popular Culture and their Political Impact” symposium held in Vienna in 2001 (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 3). The participants in the symposium gathered around the idea that the CCCS approach was no longer able to encompass the newly emerging subcultural formations. As such, scholars of post-subcultural studies sought to address the shortcomings in previous theoretical frameworks by examining young people as “young consumers, reflexively combining and moving between ephemeral, loosely bounded groupings in the context of an increasingly uncertain, individualised consumer society where the fixed and stable categories of the past were being replaced by more shifting, fluid identities” (Hodkinson, 631).

David Muggleton, one of the most prominent developers of the post-subcultural theory, explains in his seminal book **Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style** that youth subcultures have evolved into postmodern entities under the influence of post-Thatcherite, neo-liberal capitalism and globalism (4-5). Building upon this perspective, scholars of post-subcultural studies aimed to delineate the postmodern elements within contemporary youth cultures.

In response to the Marxist approach adopted by the CCCS, scholars of post-subcultural studies heavily drew on the ideas of the philosophers who have been influential in the field of postmodernism, such as Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler and

Pierre Bourdieu. By doing so, they aimed to map out the differences between the early formations of youth subcultures - or as Clark terms “historical subcultures,” (231) and newly emerging postmodern subcultures.

French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s notions of “simulation and simulacra” and “hyperreality” stand as key concepts that constitute the foundations of post-subcultural theory. Baudrillard put forth the idea that in contemporary society, reality has become replaced by simulations and copies, stating that “the universe, all of us, have entered into live simulation” (159). For Baudrillard, simulation is “the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of sign as value” (6). In other words, signs and symbols have altered the human perception of reality and meaning. In order to further explain his point, Baudrillard notably uses Disneyland in California as an example. He argues that:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (12-13)

According to Baudrillard, Disneyland, being the parody of the symbol and sign-heavy simulation that the Western society has collectively built, tricks people to believe that outside of its borders are real. Baudrillard’s argument is that the modern Western society belongs to the hyperreal order where reality is no longer relevant to human experience. Reality is coated with a layer of symbols of signs that constitute the order of simulation. As Baudrillard states:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. (2)

Baudrillard argues that all meaning ultimately dwindles into their representative image, to the extent that it becomes imperceptible. The system of signs, being profoundly malleable, is susceptible to replication, modification, and transformation with each iteration.

According to Baudrillard, the four successive phases of image begin with “the reflection of a profound reality” (6). The first phase implies a direct connection between the image and the reality it represents. Secondly, “it masks and denatures a profound reality” (6) In this stage, the image still appears to have a connection to

reality, but it starts to conceal and distort the true nature of that reality. It becomes a selective representation. Moving on to the third phase, Baudrillard states that the image “masks the *absence* of a profound reality” (6). At this stage, the image creates a simulated representation that gives the illusion of an underlying reality where there is, in fact, none. The image becomes a self-sustaining entity, a fabrication. Finally, “it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (6). It is at the fourth stage that the image completely severs ties with any semblance of a reality. It exists as a self-referential simulacrum, a hyperreal construct that has detached itself entirely from the need to represent or reflect an external reality. In other words, this phase represents the point when the image becomes a part of the hyperreal order. Baudrillard explains this outcome as follows:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself. (2)

Therefore, the hyperreal order is constituted by simulacra. As we move through the subsequent stages, Baudrillard suggests that this direct connection between the image and reality becomes more complex and detached, eventually leading to a situation where the image no longer reflects a reality but generates its own hyperreality.

Post-subcultural theorists find Baudrillard's ideas particularly effective in elucidating the evolution of youth cultures. They employ his theories to explore the transformations that contemporary cultures undergo, particularly in terms of the erosion of meaning. For example, David Muggleton argues that, through repetition, subcultural styles have lost their original meanings and became mere copies without authentic originals (96). According to Muggleton, not only did subcultures lose their initial meanings of group-mindedness, solidarity and resistance against economic and political injustices, but also creative practices such as music, fashion, and art also has become diluted into postmodern collage. In essence, Muggleton's perspective aligns with Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, where copies and simulations proliferate, gradually displacing the authenticity and meaning of the original.

Furthermore, the notion of “performativity,” as introduced by American philosopher, writer, and scholar of gender studies, Judith Butler, holds a central

position in the field of post-subculture studies. Butler's theory challenges traditional notions of gender and identity by suggesting that gender is not something inherent or fixed but is rather a socially constructed and performed identity.

Judith Butler explains the foundation of her theory of "performativity" and its connection to the works of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who is a prominent figure associated with post-structuralism and postmodern philosophy, as follows:

I originally took my clue on how to read the performativity of gender from Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's 'Before the Law.' There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. (1999: xiv-xv)

As such, Judith Butler explains how she drew inspiration from Derrida's ideas about anticipation and authority to develop her theory of performativity in relation to gender. She begins by referencing Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Franz Kafka's "Before the Law," a parable contained in his novel **The Trial** (1915) where a person waits before the door of the law and attributes a certain power or force to the law that they are waiting for. He concludes that the act of waiting and expecting something to be significant or authoritative gives it the power and significance it holds.

Butler questions whether people have a similar expectation about gender, anticipating it to be an internal essence waiting to be revealed. She suggests that this expectation itself might be what creates the idea of gender as a stable and inherent identity. In other words, by expecting gender to be something essential and fixed, we end up producing and reinforcing the very concept of gender that is, in essence, a construction. She further explains her point, stating:

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (1999, 173)

In other words, when individuals identify with a particular gender, they often do so by internalizing certain norms associated with that gender. People wish for their gender

identity to make sense and be consistent. This desire for coherence is idealized; it is an aspiration to have a clear and stable identity. In the context of gender identity, how a person presents themselves through actions, gestures and desires signifies their gender identity. Butler explains that acts, gestures, and desires produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but this effect is manifested on the surface of the body. In this sense, Butler's concepts align with Baudrillard's theory that images serve to conceal the absence of an underlying reality to which these images supposedly correspond. Similar to this belief, Butler suggests that gender performativity conceals the fact that gender identity is not something natural or predetermined but a social and cultural construction.

Furthermore, much like Baudrillard's theory concerning the detachment of images from reality through repetitive acts, Butler also posits the notion that gender is consistently enacted and reinforced through our actions and language. This, in turn, gives rise to the performative dimension of gender. Butler writes that "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (1999: 178). According to Butler, the process of performing gender is both mundane and ritualized. It is mundane in the sense that it happens in everyday life, in ordinary actions and conversations. It is also ritualized because it follows certain patterns and norms that are deeply ingrained in our culture. The repetition and ritualization of gender performance serve as powerful mechanisms that legitimize and sustain established gender norms, even though these norms are not inherently rooted in human nature.

Drawing on Butler's ideas, scholars of post-subculture studies explore the performative aspect of identity formation in contemporary youth cultures. Muggleton explains this aspect of post-subcultures in relation to Butler's theory of performativity as follows:

Butler's concern is to 'de-mask', in order to subvert, the apparent stability and 'naturalness' of gender and sexual identities. She theorizes gender not as an aspect of one's identity by which one acts, but as itself an enactment that 'produce(s) that which it names'... Yet, while the ongoing repetition of these constitutive acts is constrained by pre-existent norms, it is always a differential rather than identical repetition, leading to the potential for a displacement, transformation or rewriting of gendered and sexual identities. (2004: 10)

Muggleton suggests that post-subcultural identities, like gender identities, are constructed through performative acts. He argues that Butler's gender theory emphasizes that the very act of performing gender generates the concept and meaning of gender itself. In this sense, like gender identity, cultural identity is not something predefined; it emerges through the ongoing actions and behaviours of individuals. However, according to Muggleton, forming one's identity through repetitive acts creates spaces for difference and brings about unstable and fluid identities. This variability opens up the potential for displacement, transformation, or even a complete rewriting of established cultural identities. This idea further highlights Muggleton's understanding of post-subcultural practices as simulacra, or copies that lack original sources.

Another scholar of post-subcultural studies, Sarah Thornton, draws on the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" which refers to the "knowledge that is accumulated through upbringing and education which confers social status" (Thornton 1995: 24). Thornton argues that, in contemporary times, subcultural knowledge has become a source of social status and power among young people (1995: 25). In other words, subcultural knowledge as well as the image of heroic delinquent has become desirable by the young population, after its promulgation in movies and television for decades. In this sense, the traditional purpose of subcultural identification has shifted. While it was previously understood as collective problem solving and group solidarity, it has transformed into an individualistic ambition for constructing a distinct identity that sets them apart and grants them influence and prestige within their social spheres.

Thornton also differentiates historical subcultures from post-subcultures examining their relationships with media. She explains this in the following way:

Journalists and photographers do not invent subcultures, but shape them, mark their core and reify their borders. Media and other culture industries are integral to the processes by which we create groups through their representation. ... [S]o niche media like the music and style press have been instrumental in the development of youth subcultures. (1995: 242-243)

Thornton's analysis presents a contrasting view to the CCCS conceptualization of media as an "Other" to subcultural formations. While scholars such as Stanley Cohen, affiliated with the CCCS, highlighted media's tendency to demonize youth

subcultures, creating “folk devils” and fueling “moral panics” in society, Thornton argues that consumer, media and commercial culture became inextricable from contemporary youth subcultures. As such, moving away from the CCCS understanding, scholars of post-subcultural studies note that contemporary youth subcultures are “constructed through rather than existing prior to media discourse” (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 10).

As time progressed, youth cultures underwent yet another dramatic transformation. The postmodern elements attributed to youth cultures by post-subculturalists – namely, performativity, individualism and fragmentation – amplified with the opening of a new social space named cyberspace.

1.3. Alternate Identities in Cyberspace

The Internet has revolutionized the way we connect with others. It has facilitated the formation of virtual communities, enabling interactions without the limitations of geography. The study of cyberculture finds its origins in the 1960s at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Initially, the concept emerged in relation to science fiction, leading to analyses that were divided into dystopian and utopian perspectives. However, as the Internet became an integral part of daily life in the 2000s, scholarly research increasingly shifted its focus towards symbolic interactionism and the formation of identities within this digital realm (Vicente and Amaral, 431).

It is also important to note that the terms cyberspace and cyberculture are often used interchangeably. As David Bell suggests, “Setting up a distinction between cyberspace and cyberculture is a false dichotomy. ... [C]yberspace is always cyberculture, in that we cannot separate cyberspace from its cultural contexts” (8). In other words, the digital world is not a neutral space, but rather one that is shaped by cultural practices. This means that concepts of cyberspace and cyberculture cannot be fully understood in isolation from one another.

The term “cyberculture” is a broad concept that encompasses all cultural and social interactions that take place through the medium of the Internet. It describes “the sociocultural and political dynamics of digital technologies, which promotes a reformulation of social relations and the creation of communities in virtual

environments, while at the same time fostering the emergence of new behaviours and social practices” (Vicente and Amaral, 431).

On the other hand, the term “cyberspace,” was coined by the American-Canadian novelist William Gibson and used in his science fiction novel **Neuromancer** (1982). In his novel, Gibson defines cyberspace as follows:

Cyberspace: A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. (67)

Gibson’s phrase “consensual hallucination” suggests that cyberspace is a digital world that is not physical or tangible, but rather a shared experience that is only tied to reality by the fact that it is being perceived by the brain, as a hallucination is. In this sense, cyberspace amplifies the postmodern element of hyperreality which Muggleton identifies in post-subcultural formations. Muggleton asserts that, in postmodern times “styles become subject to time-space compression, a dislocation from their original temporal-spatial origins, then in the wake of the irrevocable loss of these referents we can no longer experience the real” (2022: 45). In this way post-subcultural symbols “become hyperreal as reality is eclipsed” (Muggleton 2022: 46). In cyberspace, the notion of hyperreality is even more pronounced, as the digital world offers endless possibilities for creating and manipulating symbols and identities.

The feedback loop between cyberspace and the physical world is what gives cybercultures its hyperreal aspect. Events that occur on the Internet have an effect on “real life.” Examining the hyperreal element that characterizes cyberspace, the researchers of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the Warwick University’s Philosophy Department coined the term “hyperstition,” to describe this phenomenon. The term appears in the collection of their writings between the years 1997 and 2003, in the following paragraph:

According to the tenets of Hyperstition, there is no difference in principle between a universe, a religion, and a hoax. All involve an engineering of manifestation, or practical fiction, that is ultimately unworthy of belief. Nothing is true, because everything is under production. Because the future is a fiction it has a more intense reality than either the present or the past. (CCRU, n.p.)

The description of hyperstition by the CCRU is reminiscent of Muggleton’s reading of post-subcultural symbols as simulacra that attain imaginary and new connotations,

creating hyperreal meanings through repetitive use. Similarly, in cyberspace, fiction “has a more intense reality”. There, nothing distinguishes a religion from a hoax, thanks to the power of creating and replicating imaginary realities, bestowed upon the computer user. Truth and falsehood can have the same volume, and each compete for credibility on the same platforms in cyberspace. Because these platforms are built to maximize profit, they depend on the algorithmic manipulation of users’ emotions. There is also no time to consider information, meaning that feelings will decide our reactions to the relentless stream of data. In this sense, it is a realm of “post-truth” where “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford English Dictionary “post-truth”).

Eventually, this exposure to post-truth starts to affect individuals’ perception of themselves. Sherry Turkle, a prominent scholar in the field of identity formation in cybercultures, explains this aspect of cybercultural identities, stating:

My textual actions are my actions - my words make things happen. I created selves that were made and transformed by language. And different personae were exploring different aspects of the self. The notion of a decentered identity was concretized by experiences on a computer screen. In this way, cyberspace becomes an object to think with for thinking about identity - an element of cultural bricolage. (1999: 646)

Words inscribed onto the digital realm “make things happen,” in this sense, they display hyperstitious characteristics. Cyberspace allows for the creation of new forms of social interaction and identity formation that were not possible before. For instance, as Turkle mentions, it enables its users to construct multiple identities simultaneously. The notion of multiplicity and fluidity was also observed in post-subcultural formations. Muggleton states:

[W]e can ... understand postmodern subcultural identities to be multiple and fluid. Constituted through consumption, subcultural style is no longer articulated around the modernist structuring relations of class, gender, ethnicity or even the age span of youth. Instead, these modernist looks become recycled as free-floating signifiers. (2022: 46)

The prevalence of subcultural styles in popular culture has not only allowed individuals to easily purchase symbolic items but also to mix and match different cultural elements. Yet, this phenomenon has been magnified by the rise of cyberspace. Because “[i]n cyberspace, I can change my self as easily as I change clothes. Identity becomes infinitely plastic in a play of images that knows no end. Consistency is no longer a virtue but becomes a vice; integration is limitation. With everything always shifting, everyone is no one” (Taylor and Saarinen, 272). Consistency was a

requirement for early subcultures. Skinheads' cropped hair, work-boots, sta-prest trousers, which they wore day after day as a uniform, all signified their working-class background. In cyberspace, on the other hand, multiple identity formation has been as easy as clicking on new windows on a computer or a phone screen. As seen, there is a trend emerging through subcultures, post-subcultures and cybercultures. Each use the replication of symbols to form identities, but with decreasing levels of stability and group cohesion.



CHAPTER TWO

POST-SUBCULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN GAUTAM MALKANI'S LONDONSTANI

Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani* illustrates the process of post-subcultural identification in the socio-economic realities of the twenty-first century. The novel is set in the early 2000s, a time when subcultural belonging was determined more through role play and mimicry than authenticity (Driver, 987; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 229). The novel's protagonist and narrator Jas personifies the post-subcultural concepts of David Muggleton and Sarah Thornton regarding the identities formed through individualized and highly monetized youth subcultures. The symbolic subspaces that constitute the identity of "post-heroic bad boy"² are successfully portrayed through the dress codes, consumption rituals and the use of language among the members of the Indian-British youth subculture in the novel. In this sense, Malkani not only deals with a contemporary youth subculture's progression into hyper-materialism, consumerism and individualism, but also illustrates the process of post-subcultural identity formation of Jas, as he rigorously tries to conform to these collectively constructed symbols and codes.

Jas lives in Hounslow, West London. He struggles to obtain a sense of belonging in desi³ subculture. Along with Jas, a group of second- and third-generation British Indian teenagers (Amit, Hardjit and Ravi), who self-identify as "desis" or "desi rudeboys" are the novel's main cast of characters. Formerly ridiculed by his peers for being a "batty boy" (10, 26) – i.e., an effeminate person who is suspected of being a

² Theorists of post-subcultural studies often define post-subcultural identities as "post-heroic" in reference to classical subculture theory's conceptualisation of early subcultures as "heroic" and "defiant" against mainstream culture. The attribution of collective heroism to subcultures was highlighted in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (1975) produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Towards the end of the twentieth century, as youth subcultures became increasingly monetized and exploited, the notion of heroism turned into a symbolic expression in the form of clothing style, expressed through consumerism and consumption. In the *Post-Subcultures Reader*, Dylan Clark states: "The image of rebellion has become one of the most dominant narratives of the corporate capitalist landscape: the 'bad boy' has been reconfigured as a prototypical consumer" (Clark, 2003: 223).

³ Desi is "a person who comes from or whose family comes from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh but who lives in another country" (Cambridge Dictionary, "Desi"). The origin of the word will be discussed in more detail below.

homosexual, Jas is a physically weak, shy and insecure pupil who becomes fascinated with the powerful presence of Hardjit and his crew. Despite the objections of his history teacher and former role model Mr. Ashwood, he forgoes his studies and goes to extreme lengths, such as robbing his father's shop and putting it on fire, to be recognized by his aggressive companions as a legitimate member of their crew. Throughout the novel, the reader follows Jas in his anxious quest for identity, as he clumsily tries to mimic the conspicuous consumption patterns, hybrid language and semi-criminal lifestyle of the desi rudeboys. To conform to the expectations of his new social milieu, Jas trains himself to exhibit a hypermasculine gender performance and engage in violent behaviour.

Jas's transformation through performance is explicitly portrayed in the last pages of **Londonstani**, when the reader is informed that Jas's name is not short for "Jaswinder" (a common Indian name) as the reader would presume. Instead, he turns out to be "Jason Bartholomew - Cliveden, aged nineteen, white, male" (340). Malkani develops his novel's statement around this trick played on the reader. Jas's extensive knowledge of Sikhism, Islam and Hinduism, his specific taste in Bollywood films and Indian cuisine and his hybrid language consisting of Punjabi and Hindi terms mask his white British background, leading the reader to assume his ethnicity as Asian-British. Revealing Jas as an unreliable narrator, Malkani's twist at the end shows how Jas's desi rudeboy identity was an act of performativity. As a white British teenager, the initial integration of Jas into a South-Asian community corresponds to the post-subcultural understanding of collective identity formation, since his performance of ethnic identity and hyper-masculinity gives rise to an entirely fictionalized identity, fuelled by his desire to obtain power and a sense of validation within his community.

The reader sympathizes with Jas's confusion as he tries to navigate the complicated dynamics between rudeboys and their first-generation immigrant parents and the codes of desi society. Along the way, he meets characters such as Arun and Samira who stand outside the desi rudeboy/gora (white person) binary opposition. Arun and Samira help Jas see through the superficiality and restrictive aspects of being a member of the desi rudeboys. These two characters inhabit what Homi K. Bhabha refers to as the "Third Space" where "meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated,

rehistoricized, and read anew” (1995: 208). Instead of being reduced to oppositional categories constructed through a set of signs and rules, they occupy a space of in-betweenness. Although these sets of rules and signs initially seemed to be comfortable and clear-cut instructions through which Jas could construct an identity, eventually he realizes that he is unable to fit into either of these categories himself, neither gora nor desi rudeboy.

Jas ultimately fails to become a desi rudeboy as he never succeeds in understanding fully the unspoken rules that guide their lives. But he develops a sense of self-confidence through his quest for identity which leads him to defy the rules of the desi rudeboys and try to forge his own version of cross-cultural self. Hence, he makes progress towards his goal of discovering who he is. The novel ends with the word “Shukriya” (342) which Jas uses to express his gratitude to a Punjabi nurse, who was caring for him in the hospital. The ending demonstrates that despite being expelled from the desi rudeboys, his enthusiasm and familiarity with this South Asian culture remains. The fact that the novel’s final exchange takes place in the context of caring for his wellbeing shows how he has developed a more positive and humane cross-cultural understanding rather than a sheepish conformity or fixation with wealth and power.

2.1. Hyperindividuality and Performativity

Londonstani engages with the multi-layered facets of contemporary identity and the complex roles of gender, language and ethnicity. These roles are continuously performed (or disregarded) by Jas and the other desi rudeboys to satisfy their own needs, rather than to serve the needs of their community, or even each other. Weinzierl and Muggleton examine the role of performativity in the formation of a post-subcultural identity by taking Butler’s concept of “performativity” and applying it to the context of subcultures (Weinzierl and Muggleton, 5, 10). In **The Post-Subcultures Reader**, they describe post-subcultural formations as constantly performed and re-performed community practices that serve the subject’s individualistic needs (10). Malkani’s protagonist Jas does indeed hold an individualistic motivation for joining the desi rudeboys. He desperately wants to alter his perception in the eyes of others by using the company of the rudeboys as a shield. He describes his previous personality as follows:

I was a ponce I acted an sounded like a batty, I was a skinny wimp, I was embarrassin to have around if ladies came by, I wore crap clothes ... I'd read too many books, I walked like a fool, I had this annoying habit of sniffing all the time, I couldn't usually talk proply an even when I did I couldn't ever say the right thing. (24)

Jas's quest to learn the ways of the desi rudeboys is motivated by his concern over his clumsy disposition. His habit of "sniffing all the time" reads as a symptom of anxiety and unease. Worried about his chances of fitting with his own segment of British society, he changes his behaviour to try to fit in with the desi rudeboys in search of status and power he could not get if he remained a shy and awkward outcast. The sole purpose of his quest is individualistic. His interest in being involved with desi rudeboys derives from his desire to be perceived as powerful by belonging a group that is feared. Malkani makes this point when he shows Jas toying with the idea of being a Nazi:

I wonder if it'd be possible for a guy like me to be a Nazi. I'll daydream that I'm a Nazi. I know it sounds like I am being a wanker cos they were scum like suicide bombers, killin all them people an that. But were they all wankers? At least they walked an talked proply ... at least nobody would take the piss outta them. Fuckin saluted them instead. (32)

Jas's daydreaming about being a Nazi highlights his drift towards hyper-individualism. He perceives Nazis the way he perceives desi rudeboys, morally reprehensible collective formations with the ability to wield power over others. Striving to create a self that is inherently egocentric, he is prepared to comply with the violent and immoral behaviours of a social formation.

Muggleton claims that "contemporary subcultural styles can be understood as a symptom of postmodern hyperindividualism" (2000: 6). He uses the term "postmodern hyperindividualism" as opposed to the community-oriented, collectivist working-class subcultures of the 1950s. He writes that contemporary subcultures (or post-subcultures) "can be characterized as postmodern in that they display an individualistic, fragmented and diffuse sensibility" (2000: 6). Indeed, it is the fragmented and diffuse aspect of desi subculture that makes it challenging to mimic for Jas. The desi rudeboys take from many other cultures, namely American hip-hop, Punjabi music, Bollywood cinema, Jamaican rudeboy subculture and popular consumer culture. These are fragments from which they build a diverse but coherent post-subcultural identity, motivated by the acquisition of money and the ostentatious display of luxury goods. These are not items that the group can share. They are all

bought and put on display by each member of the desi rudeboys to try to get respect through showing off wealth and the appearance of status. In this regard, the rudeboys' ostentatious consumption is yet another sign of hyperindividualism.

Regarding the collective consumption patterns of contemporary subcultures, Muggleton suggests that post-subcultural formations can be viewed "somewhat paradoxically, as collective expressions and celebrations of individualism" (2000, 79). When their former teacher Mr. Ashwood inquires about their ambitions, one of the rudeboys, Ravi, reveals that they were asked the same question by the career advisers and that his answer was he either wanted to be a stockbroker or a rapper. When he was warned by his career adviser that the path to being a stockbroker began in school and that only a select few of people were lucky enough to be famous rappers, Ravi states "I'm one in a fuckin zillion, I told her, innit" (130). The egocentric worldview of the desi rudeboys can be considered a product of their media consumption, such as Hollywood and Bollywood movies that often depict self-made individuals, and American rap musicians' egotistical lyrics, which they occasionally incorporate in their everyday language. As Jas states, Ravi seizes every opportunity "to adopt one a his gansta-rap poses" and enjoys not "really speakin but stead ... just quoting hardcore rap tracks" (122). Ravi's highly individualistic and materialistic ambitions and his theatrical self-display suggests how desi rudeboy identity is dependent on hyperindividuality, as well as the capability of its members to demonstrate learned performance.

The fact that Jas forms his ultimately egocentric identity through a group of bullies and verbally abusive adolescents can be understood with the psychoanalytic theory of identity formation and identification developed by the French theorist Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan, the subject forms their identity through engagement with "the other," who acts as a mirror and as an "ideal-image" (Lacan 6-7). The process of identification with an ideal-image is inherently narcissistic, since the individual formulates a fictional identity via the other to fulfil his imagined desire (Lacan, 6). In **Londonstani**, Jas aims to formulate an identity within a community that is also simultaneously egocentric, as he needs them around to fulfill his individual desire for respect. He uses Hardjit the leader of the crew, as an ideal image to shape

his own behaviour, dress, and worldview. He describes Hardjit's profound impact on him as follows:

I in't ashamed to admit I'm envious of Hardjit Most bredren round Hounslow were jealous a his designer desiness, with his perfectly built body, his perfectly shaped facial hair an his perfectly groomed garms that made it look like he went shopping with P. Diddy. (3-4)

The repetition of the adverb "perfectly" indicates that Jas holds Hardjit as an ideal-image and a mirror through which he strives to sculpt a new sense of self. As such, he objectifies Hardjit and constantly tries to imitate and observe his actions to determine whether he is succeeding in this transformation.

As mentioned above, the desi rudeboys borrow from a variety of youth cultures and mimicking these cultures' behavioural patterns demands constant and meticulous attention to detail. Having a place in a post-subculture depends on performativity or what Muggleton calls an "ongoing process of enactment" (2000: 92). Jas's never-ending effort to decode and emulate the actions of desi rudeboys is clear from the novel's very first page. The opening scene of **Londonstani** has Jas narrating as Hardjit beats up a teenage white boy for allegedly calling him "Paki". His thorough account makes it evident that Jas closely scrutinizes and studies every minute detail in the deeds of his idol:

-Serve him right he got his motherfucking face fuck'd, shudn't b callin me a Paki, innit.

After spitting his words out Hardjit stopped for a second, like he expected us to write em down or someshit. Then he sticks in an exclamation mark by kickin the white kid in the face again.

-Shudn't b callin us Pakis, innit, u dirrty gora

Again, punctuation came with a kick, but with his left foot this time so it was more like a semicolon. (3)

In addition to the combination of Punjabi words such as "gora" (white person) with London slang ("innit") and 2000s-era texting lingo (the contraction of "be" as "b"), what stands out is Jas's comparison of Hardjit's brutal kicks to punctuation marks of a written text. This striking imagery informs the reader that Jas holds an analytical point of view of performativity. Punctuation marks are symbolic guides for the reader to determine the rhythm and disambiguate the meaning of written language. In a similar attempt to make sense of Hardjit's violent performance, Jas reads and interprets it as a textual artifact which would hold an artistic value and convey a creative expression. As Aaron Goodfellow suggests, Lacan offers "to recognize the radically

textual quality of being, to embrace the idea that being is to be a being-of-language” (85). Indeed, Lacan says that unconscious is first shaped in language and is structured like language (Lacan, 179). Jas’s thought process and his textual interpretation of Hardjit’s actions shows us that Jas forms, navigates and performs his sense of being through language. For instance, as he informs the reader about Hardjit’s sensitivity of being called a Paki, he uses the following words:

“Regarding it as some kind a civic duty to educate others in this social etiquette, he [Hardjit] continued kickin the white kid in the face, each kick carefully planted so he didn’t get blood on his Nike Air Force Ones (the pair he’d bought even before Nelly released a track bout what wikid trainers they were)”⁴ (4).

In his review on **Londonstani**, Gary Younge questions the above quotation by writing “It’s unclear how someone who thinks in terms of civic duty’ and ‘basic social etiquette’ can move so easily to Nelly’s ‘wikid’ sneakers” (Younge). One possible reason is that, as he continues to describe the graphic beating, the two selves of Jas clash. One of these selves represents his former, studious self; and the latter being his newly formed and performed post-subcultural self. As such, his confused and fragmented sense of identity reflects on his use of language. Although he wants to suppress his former intellectual self, he simultaneously needs it to make sense of Hardjit’s actions. Therefore, his intellectual voice continues to manifest itself in his narration.

Jas’s alienation from his cerebral side, his frustration towards his mother’s posh accent “Mum always makes me feel nauseous,” (33) “If what she has to say in’t enough to piss me off her fake posh accent will” (84) and his repeated claims that he is ashamed of his last name (294) indicate that he wishes to completely distance himself from his former self, and even from his original name, Jason, which he finds embarrassing. Lacan claims that the subject must give up their prior identification with the mother in order to enter the symbolic phase, where they identify with the father (Lacan 152). Jas’s detachment from all links to the ethnicity of his birth and background, along with his studious upbringing, stems from his adoption of the desi

⁴ Not only does Jas keep a watchful eye on Hardjit’s performance of his role as a violent gang leader, he also studiously notes the shoe brand Hardjit is wearing and its significance for the gang members. The song released by the American rapper Nelly increases the symbolic value of the shoe for the desi rudeboys. The mediatization and monetization of post-subcultures will be further discussed in the next subchapter.

rudeboys' toughness and masculinity as an ideal-image. Identification, according to Lacan, is "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 2). For Jas, it is the image of a brutal beating over an insult. He states that "Ravi had spotted the white kid in the first place an Amit'd helped Hardjit pin him against the brick wall. But me, I hadn't added anything to either the physical or verbal abuse a the gora" (9). Then, in this setting akin to a movie, he forces himself to put on a performance. He notes:

I decided to offer the following carefully crafted comment

-Yeh bredren, knock his fuckin teeth out. Bruck his fucking face. Kill his fuckin... well, his fuckin, you know, him. Kill him.

This was probly a bit over the top but I think I'd got the tone just right an nobody laughed at me. At least I managed to stop short a sayin, Kill the pig, like the kids do in that film Lord a the Flies. It's also a book too, but I'm trying to stop knowing shit like that. (9)

The above quotation both exemplifies the performative aspect of Jas's behaviour and his attempt to tame his intellectual side. The reference to William Goldings novel **Lord of the Flies** emphasizes his awareness of being in a rather dystopic setting where survival depends on ravenous brutality. When asked about Jas's rejection of his intellectual side in an interview, Malkani answers:

Jas suppresses his intellectual side because I wanted to show how in this hip-hop influenced, macho urban youth scene, intelligence, sensitivity, and depth of character are viewed as feminine traits. The hyper-masculinity that drives the characters—which is reinforced by traditional Indian culture as well as hip-hop culture—requires them to suppress such feminine traits (Londonstani Reader's Guide).

Jas struggles to construct his rudeboy identity through a number of performative acts. Hyper-masculine gender, language, and ethnicity performativity present critical challenges to achieving his goal. Even though he is well aware of the vulgarity and immorality of the gang's behaviour, Jas repeatedly trains himself throughout the novel to adapt to their aggressive and hyper-masculine gender performance. The reader witnesses Jas's internal reckoning, as he tries to conform to the coded language they use. At times, he laments the fact that he is not the "Proper Word Inventor" (50) since he finds their usage of homophobic and misogynistic terminology upsetting and demeaning:

If I was the Proper Word Inventor I'd do two things differently. I wouldn't decide that the proper word for a deep an dickless poncey sap is a gay batty boy or that the proper word for women is bitches. That shit in't right. I know what other poncey words like homophobic and misogynist mean an I know that shit in't right. But what am I s'posed to do bout it? If I don't speak proply using the proper words then these guys'd say I was acting like a batty boy or a woman or a woman acting like a batty boy. (44-45)

Although his social awareness enables him to recognize the toxicity and churlishness of the words, Jas represses his intelligence to be accepted by his “bredrens”. Nevertheless, he finds it difficult to employ terms like “batty boy” and “bitch” because of their offensive overtones. As Malkani claims language is a significant tool for the desi rudeboys, “with rhythmic verbal abuse often acting as surrogate fists. Indeed, it is often as if boys’ tongues take on some kind of phallic symbolism” (Malkani “What’s Right with the Asian Boys”). Jas navigates the desi rudeboys’ use of hurtful language to highlight their hyper-masculine display and establish dominance in their community. Indeed, the language performance of the desi rudeboys is reminiscent of Butler’s notion of “linguistic injury”. Drawing on Lacan’s conception of self-formation through an imaginary other, Butler suggests that the destructive power of language allows the subject to highlight his or her culturally constructed and inauthentic identity, through the assertion of power he or she exhibits upon a culturally determined Other (Butler, 1997: 5-18). Therefore, the desi rudeboys constantly feel the need to create imaginary rivals, including, Muslim people, women and coconuts⁵, over whom they can exert their power in order to maintain their subcultural distinction. Jas explains to the reader “Amit felt as passionate bout healing coconuts as Hardjit felt bout healin rednecks who used the words Paki an Ravi felt bout healing lesbians” (22). As such, maintaining their collective identity is a never-ending quest dependent on the formation of rivals that enable them to highlight the characteristics of their subculture. In this sense, the characters’ collective identity is entirely performative and has “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 1999: 173).

The novel follows Hardjit and his crew as they beat up white people, fight Muslims and dangerously drive around London in their “Beemers” (BMW). Their violence takes physical form, as well as verbal. They verbally attack an South Asian person for listening to Coldplay, a band associated with the “overwhelmingly white” (Fast, 309) Britpop movement in the UK. Jas acknowledges that he is “thankful” that he is “not a gimp into that whole Britpop/R.E.M. scene no more” (59) but the fact that

⁵ The term “coconut” refers to British Asian individuals whom the desi rudeboys accuse of adopting white cultural traits and behaviours.

he has abandoned his musical preferences is another sign of his estrangement from his former self. Iris Marion Young explains the limiting aspect of contemporary communities as follows:

community is an understandable dream, expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort. The dream is understandable, but politically problematic . . . because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves. (Young, 300)

Similarly, bold lines tightly define the desi rudeboy persona. Since their collective identity depends on hyper-masculine performance, any emotional or cerebral behaviour is deemed unacceptable.

The linguistic patterns of desi rudeboys are another example of a performative domain that is constantly used. Jas realizes that without altering his language, solely conforming to the media consumption of the rudeboys would not be enough for him to be fully accepted by his aggressive peers:

“I swear I watched as much MTV Base an Juggy D videos as they [Hardjit, Ravi and Amit] have, but I still can’t attain the right level a rudeboy authenticity. If I could, I wouldn’t be using poncey words like attain an authenticity, innit. I’d be sayin I couldn’t keep it real or someshit. . . . After all it’s all bout what you say an how you say it. Your linguistic prowess and debating dexterity (though whatever you do don’t say it that way)” (6).

The above quotation highlights two crucial points of the novel. First, it shows that “rudeboy authenticity” is “not something that comes naturally out of social heritage, location or background, but something that is constructed and artificial” (Bentley, 181). Jas’s attempt to obtain a desi rudeboy authenticity by watching MTV Base and the music videos of the British Indian bhangra⁶ singer Juggy D, parallels with Muggleton’s definition of post-subcultural identity, as it is “learned, embodied and updated by the acting people” (Muggleton, 2004: 44). Secondly, it illustrates Jas’s recognition of the significance of language in his self-transformation. For the desi rudeboys, language is a key symbolic marker of their subcultural formation.

The language of the desi rudeboys mainly characterized by London youth slang, combined with Punjabi terms, texting language (in which words are shortened, “them” becomes “em” and “fone” replaces “phone”) and American Hip-Hop

⁶ Bhangra is “a type of popular music combining Punjabi folk traditions with Western pop music” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, “Bhangra”).

terminology. Moreover, they borrow words such as, bredren⁷ and bling⁸ from Jamaican slang, that are also incorporated by African American rappers (Renna, 274). This blending of multi-cultural sources from which the characters draw linguistic inspiration is reminiscent of Muggleton's understanding of post-subcultures as forms of "collage," entailing "the fragmentation of mass identities even to the extent that the boundaries between established groups are breaking down" (Muggleton, 2000: 41). In contrast to the conventional singularity of classic subcultures where there is often a clear and distinct set of characteristics and symbols that define the group, the mix of different cultural spheres and signs form the post-subcultural identity of desi rudeboys.

Furthermore, the usage of contractions differs between the characters. Malkani explains on his personal website why Jas uses "in't" as a shortened form of "am not," whereas Hardjit "is comfortable and secure using the British mainstream slang 'ain't," stating that it "shows how Jas tries too hard to be a bad-boy" (Malkani "About Londonstani"⁹). It demonstrates that Jas desires to assert and solidify his identity as a desi rudeboy, through an overzealous linguistic performance. As such, language is indeed "a fabric worn by its narrator like a costume as a conscious part of his performance" (Mitchell, 332). Jas makes use of it as a tool in his quest to establish a place among the desi rudeboys.

On the other hand, when the desi rudeboys interact with their mothers, both their language and their aggressive behaviour undergo a dramatic transformation. One of the most intense phone calls with one of their mothers happens as the rudeboys circle the parking lot where Hardjit is supposed to fight a Muslim boy over the boy's pursuit of a Sikh girl and his attempt to convert her to Islam. As the desi rudeboys try to find a way to make their grand entrance "as dramatic as possible" (85) into the parking lot, where the fight is set to occur, Amit's mother calls and starts yelling at Amit. She asks him to bring her lavender oil and painkillers for her headache, as well

⁷ A close male friend, brother.

⁸ Valuable and heavy jewellery.

⁹ On his website, which can be found at <http://gautam-malkani.squarespace.com/londonstani>, Gautam Malkani provides insights on his novel. From now on, quotations taken from Gautam Malkani's website will be in-cited as (Malkani "About Londonstani").

as some cosmetic items. Amit agrees and replies with a polite “Theekh hai, Mama”¹⁰ after “she’s finished shouting” (89). Amidst their mission to make an intimidating display of machismo, the desi rudeboys immediately abandon their plans and head to the nearest pharmacy to find the items Amit’s mother wants.

“It’s a struggle to keep swearing so much for these kids. But they’re trying - trying too hard in some cases,” Malkani says in one of his interviews. “Their natural way of speaking is with their mums which is why they lay the swearing on so thick” (Graham). Both Jas and the rest of the characters constantly need to perform their identity, as none of the characters is inherently violent or raised around violence. It is a conscious choice they make to create a certain image and identity. In his article, “The Post-Subculturalist,” Muggleton states that “choosing is the operative word” in post-subcultural formation and “post-subculturalists revel in the availability of subcultural choice” (1997: 198). Jas’s ethnic background as a white person makes this act of choosing a different identity explicit and impossible for the reader to ignore. But it is also a matter of choice for the desi rudeboys. They insist on displaying their roots in their use of Hindi and Punjabi slang, while also letting everybody know all they care about is themselves.

Indeed, the name they chose for their subculture, “the desi rudeboys,” contains a reference to their ethnicity. Malkani explains the group’s use of the term “desi,” as follows:

The word ‘desi’ literally means countrymen and refers specifically to the diaspora. It is broader than terms such as Indian, Pakistani, Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, and yet narrower than the term Asian or even South Asian. It acts as a self-determined alternative to the word ‘paki’ and the enthusiasm with which it has been embraced suggests a conscious decision against appropriating the offensive word paki and trying to turn it into a positive the way black kids have done with the word ‘nigger’ (Malkani, “What is Right with Asian boys”)

Hardjit and his crew vehemently insist that their group is the “true” or the “original” desi rudeboys. The word “desi” comes from Indo-Aryan Sanskrit and as Malkani reveals, it means “countrymen” or “local” and the term “rudeboy” was used to describe a subculture which was originated in poor communities throughout Kingston, Jamaica, in the late 1950s (Hebdige, 1979: 145). Thus, the group’s self-identification as the

¹⁰ Theekh hai is Hindi for “Okay or fine” (Renna, 271). Dora Renna provides a detailed review of Hindi and Punjabi phrases in **Londonstani** in her essay, titled “Language and identity of the British Indian teenage diaspora: Gautam Malkani’s Londonstani, a case study”

“desi rudeboys” indicates the transformation of an ethnic identity into a youth subculture. Jas explains their connection to other ethnic subcultures:

First we was rudeboys, then we be Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, fuckin Indobrits. These days we try an use our own word for homeboy an so we just call ourselves desis but I still remember when we were happy with with the word rudeboy. (5)

It is not unusual for ethnic minorities to form a subcultural/collective identity through their shared cultural heritage. Many ethnicity-based subcultural groups, such as the rastafarians and ragamuffins that Jas mentions, were among the earliest subcultural movements of the twentieth century. Besides, like the desi rudeboys of **Londonstani**, these early subcultural groups were widely known for their rebellious and insubordinate members. Dick Hebdige, one of the most prominent classical subculture theorists of the CCCS, examines some of these ethnicity-based subcultures. In his work, **Subculture: The Meaning of Style** (1979), he refers to the defiant attitude that shapes the identity of the early subcultural formations among the post-war generation of black Britons who came from former UK colonies in Africa and the Caribbean:

During this period of growing disaffection and joblessness, at a time when conflict between black youths and the police was being openly acknowledged in the press, that imported reggae music began to deal directly with problems of race and class, and to resurrect the African heritage. ... Oppositional values had been mediated through a range of rebel archetypes: the rude boy, the gunfighter, the trickster, etc. – which remained firmly tied to the particular and tended to celebrate the individual status of revolt. ... Thus, the rude boy hero immortalized in ska and rocksteady – the lone delinquent pitched hopelessly against an implacable authority – was supplanted as the central focus of identity by the Rastafarian who broke the Law in profound and subtle ways. (36-37)

Hebdige interprets the aggressive behaviour of “the rude boy hero” as the youth upheaval caused by racial discrimination and economic inequality they experience. As the quotation suggests, these groups drew heavily upon their cultural endowments and the issue of race and class disparities in their music. These subcultural groups employed their artistic creativity as a form of self-expression to make political statements and to celebrate their ethnic heritage.

In **Londonstani**, Hardjit and his gang’s self-designation as the “desi rudeboys” or “desis” through the word’s etymological connection with their ethnic background, signifies their attempt to promote their community as an extension of the aforementioned subcultures. They come to idealize the “rude boy hero” image created in Jamaican ska and reggae music and use overtly masculine argot and territorial defensiveness of the rude boy hero. This sometimes manifests itself in the form of

violence and homophobia. However, the desi rudeboys cannot claim economic disadvantage, demonstrate artistic creativity or political salience, while these features shaped the collective identity of the early subcultural communities.

The desi rudeboys use their ethnic background as a cultural asset to maintain their collective identity, which they consider superior to others. As Sarah Thornton states in her book examining post-subcultural formations:

In a post-industrial world where consumers are incited to individualize themselves and where the operations of power seem to favour classification and segregation, it is hard to regard difference as necessarily progressive. The flexibility of new modes of commodity production and the expansion of multimedia support micro-communities and fragmented niche cultures. Each cultural difference is a distinction, a suggestion of superiority, an assertion of hierarchy, a possible alibi for subordination. (Thornton, 253)

By using their ethnicity as a marker of distinction, the desi rudeboys reject their parents' strategy of survival in British society as hard-working immigrants. Unlike their parents, who have struggled to find a place in British society, the desi rudeboys take the opposite approach, rejecting their parents' path to assimilation and conforming to mainstream culture. Their assertion of the desi identity is not to challenge racism, but to differentiate themselves in the pursuit of status.

Their former teacher Mr. Ashwood wishes to guide the desi rudeboys into British society by warning them against factionalism. In this, he fails to perceive the real reason for their asserting the desi identity. He states:

I don't intent to rest this old body of mine until today's youth culture stops being so divided along ethnic lines. Do you boys have any idea how hard your parents worked and how hard they fought to be accepted by mainstream society? And all for what? So you boys could throw it all away by acting like hoodlums and by volunteering for segregation. (126)

The desi rudeboys constantly blame their parents for not being proud enough of their ethnicity and not knowing enough about their religion. Ravi utters the following lines in an attempt to contradict Mr. Ashwood: "So what if our parents had to suck British butt? Dat was back then. Now it is our turn to teach em some muthafuckin self-respect, teach em not to b so fuckin disgustin" (126). As is clear from Ravi's remark, the desi rudeboys completely alienate themselves from their parents. In this regard, they differ from the working-class subcultures, such as Mods and Teddy Boys of the 1950s and 1960s that "share the same position ... the same fundamental and determining life-experiences, as the 'parent' culture" (Hall and Jefferson, 15). These subcultures were regarded by classical subcultural theorists as a cultural response that offers a "solution"

to the feeling of alienation working-class people were feeling due to the loss of public spaces after post-war redevelopment (Cohen, 59-60). The desi rudeboys, unlike traditional subcultures, do not offer any solutions that would benefit their community. According to Muggleton, post-subcultures perpetuate themselves through aesthetic symbols devoid of meaning and present “a dislocation from their original temporal–spatial origins” (46). The character of Hardjit exemplifies desi rudeboys’ estrangement from their origins. Hardjit presents himself as a devout Sikh, but his actions contradict the religion. Sikhism gives great importance to non-violence on the path to true peace and “seva” or selfless service to humankind (Singh, 2014: 122). Moreover, according to Sikh philosophy, individuation must be avoided, and egoistical individuals are thought to be trapped in the self, devoid of freedom and spiritual growth (Mandair, 28). However, Hardjit displays an overtly self-centred behaviour by abandoning his fellow desi rudeboys even when he has the chance to help them. When he smashes a stolen mobile phone in a fit of testosterone-fuelled rage, Hardjit demands Ravi find a phone that is the same brand on the same day. Ravi realizes that Mr. Ashwood, who has just saved them from arrest, has the same brand of mobile phone and he steals it. Hardjit does not need the money, he is motivated by greed. Hardjit’s character does not fit the selflessness that is a key teaching of Sikhism.

Jas says that “Hardjit wins arguments with his dad by quoting bits a the Guru Granth Sahib that his dad that didn’t even know – like them Hardcore Muslim kids who keep telling their parents what it says in the Koran” (81). Hanif Kureishi’s short story “My Son the Fanatic” tells a similar story of a second generation British-Asian teenager’s drift into Islamic extremism and the clash between him and his father, who is not strict in his religious observance. It is a recurrent phenomenon for second generation immigrants to reject assimilation and chose extremism in favour of inhabiting an “in-between,” which is a psychologically challenging place to be. According to Homi K. Bhabha, denunciation of the “in-betweenness” often results in the constant performance of identity or “mimicry” (50). However, the paradox of a life lived through mimicry “comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory ‘identity-effects’” (Bhabha, 90).

Bhabha suggests that “mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its

difference” (86). Hardjit merely mimics what he imagines Sikh religion to be but does not practice it. He turns it into a fantasy that bears no resemblance to the Sikh philosophy itself. He simply feels the need to enact and re-enact his vision of devout Sikh identity. There is an irony in how Hardjit repurposes as a weapon his “karha,” an iron bracelet worn by Sikhs that symbolizes peace, self-control, and upright citizenship (Singh, 2014: 131). Jas describes it as “some badass knuckleduster” (9) he wears around his fingers to make a punch more powerful.

Furthermore, Jas’s narration as Hardjit fights against Tariq over a dispute about religion can be read as a parody of a sports commentary. The ethnic and religious devotion of the desi rudeboys prove to be another opportunity for post-subcultural performativity. “Hardjit takes care not to mash Tariq too seriously too quickly. After all people’d come a long way to see this” (109). Jas closely observes Hardjit’s movements as if he is a professional martial artist. As his detailed narration implies, Jas sees Hardjit’s violent behaviour as a performative act rather than reality.

As we have seen, the desi rudeboys constantly display hyper-masculine linguistic and ethnic performativity to maintain their post-subcultural distinction. It is a never-ending quest for both Jas and the other members of the desi rudeboys that bring them to commit acts of violence. To realize the goals of their performance, they feel need to create and then challenge imaginary rivals who only exist in a fantasy realm.

2.2. Post-Subcultural Symbols and Loss of the Real

Londonstani tells the story of a group of teenagers who classify and segregate themselves and others through symbols. The use of symbols in **Londonstani** aligns with Muggleton’s description of post-subcultural symbols which are collectively constructed and lack original meaning. Thornton looks at the economic power carried by these symbols and emphasizes the role of media in their formation in her essay titled “The Social Logic of the Subcultural Capital” (1995). The writings of each theorists help decode the mediatization and monetization of post-subcultural symbols in **Londonstani**. As Jas delves further into the semi-criminal and affluent lifestyle of the desi rudeboys, he realizes that conspicuous consumption patterns and commodification of symbols are not unique to desi rudeboys but also prevalent in mainstream culture.

A turning point in the novel comes when Jas and his friends meet the well-educated, prestigious Sanjay, an investment banker and tax cheat. Sanjay wants to recruit them into a criminal scheme and explains the contemporary state of post-modern capitalism while making his pitch. “This isn’t about society becoming more affluent,” he explains, “this is about a subculture that worships affluence becoming mainstream culture” (171). Sanjay’s words explicitly illustrate the post-subcultural condition prevalent in the UK in the 2000s. Malkani’s depiction of the blurring lines between mainstream and subculture establishes the idea that **Londonstani** is a social commentary critiquing society’s drift into domination by post-subcultural symbols.

According to Muggleton, post-subcultures promote absolute power of the symbols (2022: 43). Indeed, the power of symbols greatly dictates the desi rudeboy way of life. When they come across another person, Jas immediately begins to describe their appearance, including their clothing, the brand of their automobile or mobile phone, and any other items they may have. After that, he comes to a decision regarding how he and his friends ought to treat them. It is usually a choice between respect or ridicule. For example, as they drive around Hounslow, they encounter another Asian-British young man driving alongside them in a “silver Peugeot 305” (20). Jas narrates his impression of the person as follows: “You could tell from his long hair, grungy clothes, the poncey novel a newspaper on his dashboard an Coldplay album playin in his car that he was a muthafuckin coconut” (20-21). After giving him and his car “nuff stares” they pull up next to his car in the traffic lights. Jas describes the man to the reader as being “so white in his brown skin” (20-21). Hardjit spares no time before lambasting the other driver directly: “We’s b havin a nice car, nices tunes, nuff nice designer gear, nuff biling mobile. But no, you wanna b some gora-lovin, dirrty hippie wid fuckin Radiohead playin in your car” (22). The exchange illustrates the degree to which Jas and the other desi rudeboys use symbols to categorize individuals and make sense of the world around them. The categorization often takes the form of a “us against them” mentality. They only distinguish and mark the person inside the car through what they perceive as his habits of consumption.

Invoking Baudrillard’s theory of “simulacra,” Muggleton suggests that “if, indeed, we are no longer consuming commodities but signs, while furthermore, the referents to which these signs supposedly refer are themselves increasingly comprised

of repetitions, then subcultural styles have become simulacra – copies without originals” (2022: 45). In other words, in post-subcultures, symbols have become more significant than what they originally represented. As a result of their repetitive use, the original meaning and purpose of these symbols are obscured.

This applies in other ways beyond consumption and consumerism. Hardjit has the “khanda” symbol tattooed on his right bicep which is a Sikh image that “represents the destruction of ego, deceit, subjugation, and an opening into a just and liberating mode of existence” (Singh, 2013: 518). And, as mentioned previously, he wields a “karha” bracelet as a weapon. However, Hardjit lacks the self-control these symbols are meant to convey. In addition to these symbols, he turns his saffron-coloured bandana, symbolizing courage in Indian culture, into an accessory he wears while fighting over petty rivalries. And his jacket with “the word ‘Desi’ sewn onto the back,” (13) a word meaning countryman, has become little more than a brand logo. The terms and colours come from his Indian background. But he strips them of their original meanings and repurposes them to legitimate his membership in desi rudeboy post-subculture. As Muggleton states, “Style is now worn for its look, not for any underlying message; or rather the look is now the message” (2000: 44).

Furthermore, when their teacher Mr. Ashwood tries to inspire them to continue with their education and have ambition and self-respect, Hardjit says “You can’t chat 2 us bout ambition n self-respect. U might got a bling fone but u drive a crapped out 1980s Volvo n carry yo books round in a plastic bag, innit” (126). Hardjit cannot comprehend that a person can have self-respect while eschewing lavish expressions of luxury. For the desi rudeboys, expensive possessions equate to self-respect. The meaning of self-respect is distorted by consumer culture so much so that the concept bears no resemblance to an inner sense of self-worth. As such, post-subcultural symbols drive people to live in an “‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality” (Muggleton 2022: 45). These hallucinations blind Hardjit and his crew to everything except for symbols of status and power.

The desi rudeboys do not form their identity through an appreciation of their mutual ethnic background, history or traditions. In an interview, Malkani comments on the (post)subcultural construction of the desi rudeboys identity, stating:

The main thing is that they're not taking [their identity] from their roots. Hardjit might pretend that he's sourcing his identity from his ethnic roots or whatever, but he's not. He's sourcing it from Hollywood, Bollywood, MTV Base and ads for designer fashion brands. All these different sources come into the mix, right. So it's a performed, made-up-as-you-go-along identity anyway, but the fact that it's a metropolitan identity reinforces that. Basically these are just fancy words for saying that these are subcultural identities. Subcultural identities do borrow from all over the shop, there's nothing intrinsic about them. (Malkani, *About Londonstani*)

The desi rudeboys form their identity from a dissonant collage of different cultural inclinations. They are not united by a sense of pride in a common ethnic heritage; rather, they are bound together by a common appreciation of consumerist markers. They drive German luxury sports cars and the Italian brand Dolce & Gabbana comprises most of their large wardrobes. They are enthusiastic about European perfume brands such as Hugo Boss and Armani. Hardjit is particularly fond of his Swedish Tag Heuer watch (19) and he likes to have a shave “cut through his left eyebrow like tree Adidas stripes” (59). Muggleton suggests that “the postmodern proliferation and fragmentation of style involves the reassembling, juxtaposing and blending of elements, thus implying at least a minimum degree of creativity, originality and uniqueness in the resulting ensembles” (2000: 45). Unlike the creative productivity of the early ethnicity-based subcultures, the desi rudeboys follow the post-modernist understanding of artistic creativity, such as the Pop-Art Movement. They borrow from the products of popular culture, designated to serve the consumerist impulses of the passive public. As such, the feeble traces of ingenuity of the post-subcultural formations can only be traced in the final product of their experimental “cut and paste identity” (Malkani “About Londonstani”).

According to Muggleton “television, particularly MTV, along with video, and the style magazines (...) – which are primarily visual rather than textual in their impact – are most usually quoted as the postmodern paradigm case” (2000: 43). Indeed, visual media such as, MTV Base and B4U desi music channels and the magazine **Cineblitz**, featuring their favorite Bollywood actors are the main sources through which they shape their identity. As Muggleton explains, “By inscribing visual signs upon their bodies, subculturalists revel in this simulation culture, becoming, in turn, mere models themselves and ‘imploding’ into the media” (Muggleton). Hardjit reads and rereads his favorite idol Hritnik Roshan’s daily body building routine in **Cineblitz**. Moreover, as Jas mentions, Hardjit’s Nike Air Force shoes, his silver chain and metal dog tags

makes him “look like he went shopping with P Diddy” (4). These post-subcultural symbols illustrate how desi rudeboys are absorbed by their idols they see in media that they aim to emulate these visual symbols into their own appearance. This leads to a situation where individuals become a part of media representation.

In order to identify the distinctive consumption patterns of contemporary subcultures, Sarah Thornton coins the term “Subcultural Capital” (1995). In her work, she analyses the commercialization of the youth subcultures in neoliberal times and defines the role of media in formation of post-subcultures:

For within the economy of subcultural capital the media is not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction ... but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge. The difference between being in and out of fashion, high and low subcultural capital correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure. (1995: 203)

Hence, the knowledge of the group members about the norms of their post-subculture and their excellence in conforming to these consumption patterns determine the in-group status hierarchies. Among the desi rudeboys, Hardjit is the most respected one. He is admired by his peers for his hyper-masculine gender performance, his mastery in their subcultural hybrid language and, above all, for his conspicuous consumption of luxury goods. Since outrageous consumerism is a significant indicator of the “bling” (Malkani, 2006: 22) lifestyle for the desi rudeboys, owning products from luxurious brands has an important role in the assertion of their identity. As Blackman states, “The post-subcultural emphasis on consumer choice to buy into subcultures reduced subcultural identity to a neo-liberal cash nexus where freedom to choose was confused with authenticity and the DIY basis of subcultural agency and dissent was lost” (508). Thus, the desi rudeboy identity can be read as a market-driven commodity, constructed through their choice to acquire post-subcultural symbols that define their membership to their group.

As Jas continues to learn and acquire the conspicuous consumption patterns of the desi rudeboys, he also realizes that such symbols dominate the lives of their families. He notes that religious symbols and display of wealth go hand in hand in the apartments of Hounslow: “Some houses had got Om symbols stuck on the wooden front doors behind glass porches, some a them had Khanda Shahibs an others had the Muslim crescent moon. All a them had satellite TV dishes next to the main bedroom

window” (17). Their parents’ understanding of religion also exhibits a loss of reality as they judge one another’s commitment to their faith based on their display of material possessions (“bling”). Jas mentions a time when the desi rudeboys and their families gather in “one a their mum’s high society satsangs” (82). A “satsang” in Hindu and Sikh traditions that brings people together for spiritual meditation on the road to “ego-less consciousness” (Mandair, 29-30) has turned into a show of affluence for their parents. Arun, Ravi’s brother, describes what his mother anticipated from the gathering:

... serving just enough pakoras an receiving just the right amount a compliments from her guests bout her house an – if she was really in luck – her clothes and jewelry. She could go to bed that nite feelin in her heart an in her soul that both God an her high-society satsang guests had been impressed by how she displayed her devotion to the finest furniture an forks an stuff that her husband’s money could buy. Sleepin underneath her silk bedcovers, knowing extra blessings an big-ups would be going out to her tonite cos she’d placed her copy a whatever Hindu holy prayer book they were using on a table from Heal’s that matched her golden shawl an earrings stead a some tutty plastic Ikea one like her friend Aunty Narinder did. (82)

This excerpt highlights the transformation of the “satsang” from a spiritual gathering to a display of wealth for the parents of desi rudeboys. The real meaning shifts from a quest for ego-less consciousness to impressing others with their material possessions. As Jas observes “All the satsang guests tryin to reserve their parkin space in Heaven by leaving their last years-model hatchback at home an pullin up in their husbands Benz, Beemer or Audi instead” (83). We see that display of wealth conveys the same level of importance for both the parents and desi rudeboys.

Analyzing the use of post-subcultural symbols as a form of conspicuous consumption, Thornton explains that it grants “status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. It affects the standing of the young in many ways like its adult equivalent” (202). It is not only desi rudeboys who take symbols of consumption from media and implement them into their daily life. Their parents also pay close attention to “what kind a saris all the actresses wearing” (250).

The character most impacted by this concern with displays of wealth is Amit’s brother, Arun. He is overwhelmed by the expectations surrounding his upcoming wedding, including the pressure from his mother for his fiancée to wear an expensive diamond set at the wedding reception. His mother’s statement “the whole town will know is from us. She wears cheap set, everyone vil think we are cheap people” (262) further highlights the importance she places on material possessions as a status symbol.

His mother's fear of losing face implies a deep insecurity with her own status, one shared by the desi rudeboys, who are constantly ready to fight to assert their place in a hierarchy of consumption and symbols.

Arun's character does not fit into the typical classification of either desi rudeboy or gora. He repeatedly advises Jas to be open-minded and not allow his friends limit his perspective (233). Jas's conversations with Arun help him realize that there is a possibility of employing a third space of in-between that can transcend the "us versus them" mentality, driving the desi rudeboys' behaviour. As his friendship with Arun develops, Jas manages to convey his thoughts more confidently. Arun tells Jas that his parents expect his fiancée Reena's family to pay them more respect because although both families are Hindu, Arun's family is of a higher caste in Indian society (239). They are Brahmins, the descendants of Hindu priests. Brahmins who live lives as priests practice austerity, voluntary poverty, and extreme simplicity of appearance as spiritual mentors (Chakraborty, 155). The fact that Arun's parents view being a Brahmin as a symbol of prestige further establishes the idea that meaning has been distorted in postmodern society.

Arun explains his family's perspective on caste to Jas. And in Jas's response, we see how he has developed the self-confidence to critique the culture that helped create the desi rudeboys:

Castes don't exist ... all in *The Matrix*, all part a some illusion created by people who want power over others. You did history with Mr. Ashwood, right? The world is full a categories a people that were just, like, invented randomly. How can someone be a Brahmin if the categories don't really exist in the real world? (239)

It is noteworthy that Jas refers to the 1999 movie **The Matrix**, - often associated with postmodern theory - to explain the desi parents' lives. As Clare Allen notes "during the early scenes of the film one of the characters, Neo, hides his illicit software in a copy of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*" (175-176). Baudrillard's theory examines how symbols lose meaning and become ghosts of their former selves via replication, which he calls simulacra. As Allen states "the idea that the symbol has taken on new meaning and become more 'real' than the 'real' is highly relevant to Londonstani" (Allen, 176). Indeed, Jas recognizes that the desi parents he meets have a tenuous understanding of reality, which is mediated by displays of wealth. He says: "if your mum thinks getting Reena an her family to big you guys up gives you self-

respect an dignity then she don't know the meaning a the words" (240). Jas's bold statement immediately reminds the reader of Hardjit's definition of self-respect in his exchange with Mr. Ashwood where he insists that self-respect is only attainable through the acquisition of material possessions. This further establishes the idea that both desi rudeboys and their parents' perception of reality have been shaped and distorted by media and consumer culture. The pressure from his parents ultimately leads to Arun's suicide, showing the psychological toll that the obsession with wealth and status can have on individuals. As a character who rejects both the post-subcultural living of the desi rudeboys and his parents demands to use his wedding as a status display, Arun is unable to find a place in a society saturated with post-subcultural symbols.

Like Arun, Samira is a character who does not fit any of the categories constructed by the desi rudeboys. She is a political activist and a member of the human rights group Amnesty International. Her activism involves women's rights in Pakistan and cosmetic testing on animals. As Jas mentions, the only time he has heard Samira talk about jewelry was "when she went off on one bout Angolan conflict diamonds" (64). "Angolan conflict diamonds" refers to the diamonds mined and sold in Angola to finance armed conflict which resulted in bloodshed and human rights abuses throughout the country's civil war (Hoekstra, 1322). Unsurprisingly, the desi rudeboys disdain Samira for rejecting their lifestyle of lavish consumption, not showing interest in post-subcultural symbols and power struggles, and as Jas puts it, "violating all them standard desi-girl rules that said all you should do is smile, look pretty ... learn advanced as well as basic Indian cooking" (65). Since Samira is a Muslim, the desi rudeboys, who are Sikh and Hindu, forbid Jas from seeing her. However, Jas is intrigued by Samira's powerful, assertive, and self-assured demeanour. He approaches her to put his newfound confidence to the test. Samira reciprocates his interest. Although their relationship is short-lived, it contributes to Jas's character development, as their conversations expose him to perspectives that challenge the beliefs and assumptions held so strictly by the desi rudeboys.

For instance, in one of his conversations with Samira, Jas questions the impact of media consumption on desi parents and attributes the parents' warped perception of reality to desi soap operas. He states that:

Its all those desi soap operas on Zee TV. Think how many times they show slow motion action replays a people looking angry an offended ... they spend so long watching that crap no wonder they got to invent big dramas an insults an conflicts in their heads just to make their lives as interestin as the bulshit on TV. (222)

This realization shows how Jas's interactions with Samira have helped him to critically analyze the role of media consumption in shaping people's perceptions. According to Jas, these desi soap operas have significant influence on the desi parents, leading them to view real-life conflicts and interactions as larger and more dramatic than they actually are. We also know that Hardjit, his little sister and his mother regularly purchase Bollywood and Hollywood gossip magazines such as **Stardust** and **Cineblitz** and argue over who will keep them in their bedroom (53). The fact that both desi rudeboys and their parents use the same source of media illustrates that post-subcultural symbols have been co-opted by mainstream culture. As Clark explains, post-subcultural symbols are "heavily interactive with capitalist enterprise ... and, at the same time, something of a pawn of the culture industry" (227).

The integration of post-subcultural symbols into popular culture becomes clear when Mr. Ashwood introduces the rudeboys to his former student Sanjay, a wealthy businessman and graduate of the prestigious University of Cambridge. Mr. Ashwood hopes Sanjay, who is also of South Asian descent, will be able to set an example to inspire the desi rudeboys to abandon their hoodlum behaviour and contribute to society in a positive way. Mr. Ashwood confuses Sanjay's success for upright behaviour in the mainstream culture.

What he does not know is Sanjay is a criminal engaged in tax fraud, creating and shutting down cell phone companies and in the meantime making money by falsely claiming VAT (value-added tax) from the government, as he sells and buys phones from different companies that he owns across the European Union's trading bloc. Never actually selling them to the public, he illegally profits from tax refunds the law allows. When he meets the desi rudeboys, Sanjay asks them to stop their semi-criminal enterprise of unblocking mobile phones and switch to even more illegal behaviour by providing him with stolen phones. He insists that they use their influence on desi community in Hounslow to urge their former conspirators to steal more mobile phones for them to sell him. Sanjay's aim is to distract authorities from his VAT tax fraud. He believes that when he gets caught with stolen phones in one of his trucks, it

will be for his benefit since thievery from the average consumer is more lightly punished than stealing tax revenue from the government of the United Kingdom (313).

In an attempt to convince the desi rudeboys to participate in his fraudulent scheme, Sanjay offers to give them lectures about what he refers to as “Bling-Bling Economics” (169). As Malkani states, “Sanjay’s theory of Bling-Bling Economics is what the characters use to legitimize ... [their] wrong turn so in a sense, the Bling-Bling theory embodied by Sanjay is the real villain in the book” (Malkani “Londonstani Reader’s Guide”). In his lectures, Sanjay suggests that desi rudeboys will never be content with their standing in society unless they agree to work with him and make enormous amount of money. His statement “you will forever be judged and judge yourselves by your luxury consumerist aspirations” (167-168) underlines the importance of conspicuous consumption in individuals’ self-validation in post-subcultural formations. He further explains the role of consumerism in the lives of desi rudeboys as follows:

I mean, never mind your D&G shirts, I can tell just from your designer haircuts that you don’t listen to Radiohead and campaign against environmental pollution, do you? No. Conspicuous consumption, luxury brands, immediate gratification and nice things are much too important to you, that much at least you guys have already decided. (167)

Sanjay’s ideology inverts the classical understanding of subcultures as a subversive and heroic act against the mainstream. Instead, his defiance of what he regards as the mainstream leads to a path that promotes a sheer display of excessive consumption. Thus, built upon the knowledge of mass media and consumer markets, the subcultural distinction of the desi rudeboys relies upon their shared patterns of consumption.

In his lectures, Sanjay compares his ideology to that of Mr. Ashwood who patiently tries to get Hardjit and his crew “interested in our mainstream, multicultural society again, in books, plays, politics, public institutions like the BBC” (77). As opposed to Mr. Ashwood’s efforts to integrate the gang into the mainstream society, Sanjay promotes the other side of this binary opposition, stating that those who understand, and practice “Bling-bling Economics” will be the ones who profit most from the ethos of global capitalism. Sanjay continues by saying:

You do have the option of listening to Radiohead, taking a relatively low-paid job and reading lots of books to make you feel like you’ve got a wealthy mind or soul or whatever. But if that isn’t the path you choose then I’m afraid this is it, guys. It’s not greed, it’s just the way it is. Believe me, I’ve thought a lot about this, I used to be Mr. Ashwood’s favourite dork, remember. But there’s no Marxist alternative anymore. The fall of communism, the rise of bling. (78)

Sanjay's claim that "there is no Marxist alternative anymore" is reminiscent of Muggleton's statement, "whereas images once reflected and represented reality, or even produced an ideological mystification of reality (as in the Marxist sense), the image now serves to distract us from the fact that there is no reality to which it seems to refer" (2000: 41). What distinguishes post-subcultures from other subcultures is the absence of meaning beyond status and wealth in post-subcultural symbols. Sanjay concludes that the "Marxist alternative" is no longer viable under the hegemony of global capitalism. He claims that those who are not wise enough to embrace the "bling" culture, are destined to be exploited in their low-paid jobs. In this sense, his ideology subvert the classical subculture theorists who emphasize the economic disadvantage, political and social awareness and activism of subcultural formations. As it is understood from Sanjay's lectures, his perspective on the value of subcultures takes a different approach. He wishes to convert subcultural capital into economic capital by taking the post-subcultural path of Bling-bling economics, which brings a financial reward to the post-subcultural identifier. In this sense, Sanjay's ideological perspective matches Sarah Thornton's concept of "Subcultural Capital," which highlights how the contemporary subcultural formations' distinctive consumption patterns and the ability to gain financial income through their powerful post-subcultural position in the society.

Trying to take advantage of this phenomenon as best they can, the desi rudeboys saturate their lives with an excess of cultural signs. Consumer culture distorts and twists the understanding of what is real for both the desi rudeboys, and for other the larger parts of the society. As Sanjay explains: "what was once niche, is quickly becoming a bedrock of mainstream society with more force than any other youth subculture" (170). Television and music videos stand out as important sources of information for their post-subcultural identity construction. The desi rudeboys' choice to acquire these symbols is driven by their consumption of the same media sources. This emphasizes the idea that post-subcultural identity is constructed not only through hyper-masculine, ethnic and linguistic performativity but also in relation to shared, media-informed patterns of hyper-consumerism.

The reader accompanies Jas as he reaches his nadir. After Arun's death by suicide, he falls into a profound depression and loses the ability to eat and sleep, which

causes his physical health to deteriorate. In need of comfort and emotional support, he repeatedly tries to contact Samira, but she breaks up with him. She thinks Jas is too needy, possessive and “just another straight-off-the-boat desi boy” (294) who wants to control her. Jas eventually loses all his friends, and he gets expelled from the desi rudeboys for advising Arun to disobey his mother. The crew holds Jas responsible for Arun’s death and they forbid him from attending his funeral. Jas, however, defies the crew and attends the ceremony with a slightly grown beard, following the Hindu custom of not shaving beforehand. As he explains to the reader, according to a Hindu belief, the deceased person’s soul visits and blesses the people who are mourning. To avoid harming the soul, mourners keep away from handling sharp objects, including shaving razors, until after the deceased is laid to rest (288). Jas following Hindu customs both shows his sincerity and respect towards his friend’s culture, and also how he has grown beyond following orders from the desi rudeboys.

The ending of the novel portrays Jas’s disillusionment with the hyperreal lifestyle he led while with desi rudeboys. As he narrates, he feels “real life slowly getting back into focus. But real life sucks. In real life Samira dumps you. In real life all them fit ladies only let you into those nightclubs cos you were with Sanjay ... In real life Arun dies” (322). The desi rudeboys’ hyper-real way of living used to provide him with an ongoing surge of excitement, but “real life” does not. However, the reader notices that Jas has developed the ability to navigate and distinguish between the two modes of behaviour and being, reality and hyperreality.

As Jas further narrates how he feels, a shift in his language pattern becomes apparent. The contractions of prepositions and conjunctions continue, but his narration now becomes more vivid and free of its earlier coarse slang. “It feels like all my life I’d been deprived a proper air, an now I’m being force-fed air bubbles directly through my skin,” (326) Jas observes. The experience of disillusionment is unpleasant and agonizing. But Jas’s analogy shows how suffocating it was to try to fit himself into the distorted vision of reality from which the desi rudeboys had banished him. When he leaves, he can finally respire.

On the evening of Arun’s funeral, Sanjay pushes him to steal from his father’s mobile phone warehouse, claiming that his father has been inserted in several bogus companies and is unknowingly complicit in a VAT-fraud scheme. Sanjay threatens Jas

with informing customs authorities about his father's involvement if he does not rob the warehouse and deliver him cell phones. Blackmailed, Jas has no choice but to agree to Sanjay's plan. Despite being exhausted and weakened from Arun's funeral and his own depression, he heads to his father's warehouse.

He narrates the experience: "As I stumble through the alley, the memory of lending Dad a hand here when I was younger gives me an adrenalin rush that helps me walk and think straight" (320). Jas uses his memory of spending time with his father to try and gather the strength he lacks. He does not call on his memories of acting like a fearsome desi rudeboy. This reverie shows that he rather seeks comfort in personal and familial relationships. It also helps remind him of a time before he met the desi rudeboys, and of having a presence outside of the performativity of post-subcultural practices.

During the burglary, Jas is attacked by three unidentified men and accidentally sets the warehouse on fire in an attempt to destroy a carpet stained by his own blood. Although Malkani leaves the identities of the attacks undisclosed, the beating is a pivotal plot point. The blood is evidence that could link him back to the crime. As he wakes up in the hospital, he is confronted by his father who says "I've respected your ways, your youngster's version of Indian culture. ... but just as I can't bear to see my son in a hospital bed, I won't be able to bear seeing him in jail either" (339-340). His father reveals that he plans to report the police officers that he dispatched Jas to the warehouse himself to try and deceive the insurance companies. Baffled by the self-sacrifice and care his parents show, Jas is filled with a mix of gratitude and guilt for his past actions. He feels a sense of acceptance from his family, which he had been searching for throughout the novel.

He decides to demonstrate his newfound sense of self-confidence to the nurse who takes care of him during his night at the hospital. Jas converses with her and correctly guesses from her nametag that she is Punjabi, wishing to convey his gratitude he considers saying "thank you," however, he reckons "Jazzy Jas Man can do better ... I shoot her a look and give it, -Shukriya" (342). The significance of the ending is twofold. First, it is a nod to his friend, since Arun has been the only character in the novel to call him "Jazzy Jas Man" (231, 230, 234). Secondly, as mentioned before, the word "shukriya," which has Arabic roots, is also used to express gratitude in Punjabi

language. This shows that Jas obtains a deeper appreciation and understanding of different cultures. It also shows how he was inspired by Arun, who did not follow the constructed desi rudeboy identity. Arun displayed a deeper acceptance of Jas, in contrast to the superficial and bullying recruiting of the desi rudeboys.

Moreover, by speaking politely with the Punjabi nurse, Jas demonstrates how he has been transformed. He positions himself in a new, hybrid space where he can better express himself and convey his enthusiasm for other cultures. Malkani describes the reason for using the term Londonstani for his novel as follows: “I used the term Londonstani rather than Londonstan to make it clear that this was a book about Jas’s story,” he explains that “Londonstani” is “a celebratory term” as it presents a multicultural environment for self-expression (Malkani *About Londonstani*). The title is a reminiscent of the term “Londoner,” but rather a new inhabitant of the city of London who can assume a hybrid position between cultures. In this sense Jas’s final transformation is an example of Bhabha’s description of a “new historical subject” as a hybrid mode of self-belonging which emerges as a result of the interaction between different cultures in a postcolonial context (216-217). Malkani further comments on his choice of the novel’s title. “If you referred to yourself as Londonstani that meant you felt you belonged here” which “transcends ethnicity” and is “more relevant in the late 20th century” compared to previous times in history (Malkani “About Londonstani”). Jas’s final development challenges the desi rudeboys’ sharp, binary construction of post-subcultural identity and offers new possibilities of understanding and reshaping cultural, historical and hybrid sense of belonging in a rapidly changing world.

In conclusion, **Londonstani** illustrates Jas’s struggle to adapt himself to the post-subcultural identity formation of the desi rudeboys, which is constructed through a number of acts, such as hyper-masculine gender, language, and ethnicity performativity, as well as the adoption of media-informed post-subcultural symbols. These symbols serve as markers of distinction and perpetuate an “us versus them” binary opposition which leads the desi rudeboys to construct their identity in contrast to an imaginary “other” represented by white people, women or anyone they perceive as weak, no matter their skin color or background. The desi rudeboy post-subcultural identity is restricting. It requires its identifier to adhere to a set of rules to maintain

their place within their post-subcultural group and defend it from accusations of illegitimacy. Characters such as Samira and Arun, on the other hand, place themselves outside of this dichotomy. Through his relationships and conversations with them, Jas acquires a broader and more inclusive cross-cultural awareness. As the title of the novel implies, instead of identifying with the desi rudeboys' stable and fixed post-subcultural formation, Jas ultimately discovers the possibility of being positioned in-between as a demonym, becoming the Londonstani. The final word, "shukriya" alludes the prospect of a new space of expression that Jas is grateful to have found. It is one where cultural belonging is not marked by the display or possession of post-subcultural symbols, but rather through cross-cultural acts of empathy and kindness.

CHAPTER THREE

A QUEST FOR SELF-VALIDATION IN CYBERSPACE: GAUTAM MALKANI'S *DISTORTION*

Like *Londonstani*, Malkani's second and latest novel *Distortion* explores the challenges of forming and maintaining a sense of belonging and identity. However, while *Londonstani* is set in Hounslow in the early 2000s, the scene where desi rudeboys wrestle with their post-subcultural identities, *Distortion* shifts the setting to the digital world of cyberspace in the late 2010s, although the characters are still in London. Much of the most important character developments and plot points occur online. Malkani uses vivid imagery to illustrate how the rhizomatic¹¹ space of the Internet affects physical reality as the new source of validation for collective social formations. In a cybercultural context, Malkani shows how identities are not only performative but can be far more fragmented and numerous than in the context of a post-subculture he explored in *Londonstani*. In the digital domain, post-subcultural elements such as hyper-individualism, consumerism, and symbolic interactionism thrive across a wider array of dimensions. This chapter aims to explore these dimensions with the help of the scholars of cyberculture studies, such as Mark Fisher and Sherry Turkle, whose insights into the impact of digital technologies on contemporary cultures shed much light on the protagonist's journey in *Distortion*.

The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Dhilan Deckartas, is born and raised in England to Indian immigrant parents. The novel follows Dhilan as he struggles to find a sense of belonging and validation in cyberspace through his three online personas: Dylan, Dhilan and Dillon. Throughout much of the novel, Dhilan's narration is fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, and hallucinatory. It is left to the reader to reassemble the events of Dhilan's life story by piecing together snippets of information from his disconnected narration. We learn from Dhilan that his parents divorced when

¹¹ "Rhizome" is a term developed by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). The term describes a non-hierarchical mode of thought that illustrates connections, fluidity, and multiplicity. The rhizome does not have a fixed centre. It grows in all directions and creates a network of connections that are constantly evolving.

he was seven years old. After their separation, Dhilan spent most of his life with his mother in the London suburb of Acton before going to study at the London School of Economics, where we meet him in his first year. Like **Londonstani**, **Distortion** can be described as a coming-of-age story, where a young man is presented with the challenges of a series of life-defining events which adds to the character's emotional development. But while in **Londonstani** the most sophisticated technology is a flip phone, **Distortion** shows what happens when culture and capitalism collide in the immersive and addictive virtual worlds of social media.

Malkani introduces the protagonist as someone whose parents' disagreement over how to pronounce his name is the crack that causes his crisis of identity, one that he will have to overcome over the course of the novel. Dhilan's father, Ramnik Deckartas, pronounces Dhilan's name as Dylan, a common English name. Dhilan constructs his Dylan persona online, embodying what he perceives to be his father's desired image of him. Ramnik himself goes by the name Nick to help his colleagues pronounce it more easily. He is a journalist who writes sensationalistic pieces for an insurance company, which puts them on its website to generate advertising revenue. Ramnik's preoccupation with his work means that he is often absent from Dhilan's life, leading to a gradual estrangement between them following his parents' divorce.

In his narration, Dhilan never reveals what his mother's real name is. He only refers to her as Mummy or Mama. She has a large family living in London who are heavily involved in her personal life. In contrast to her ex-husband, she is more rooted in her Indian heritage. Nick does not have that network, but the mother's three sisters find her decision to get a divorce from him appalling. As a child, Dhilan overhears their conversations as they discuss how his mother's divorce is a sinful act that will result in her receiving bad karma. As prophecies threaded through the novel, the sisters predict that Mama will suffer tremendously, and that "he [the son] will take the father's place" (26). This serves as an inciting incident that will be the catalyst for Dhilan's future struggles with Oedipal fixations.

Dhilan's obsession with his aunts' prophecies intensifies over time, triggering a deep-seated fear when his mother is diagnosed with breast cancer two years after the divorce. More terrifying to him is the thought that he will take his father's place by developing a sexual attraction towards his mother. His mother has had both of her

breasts surgically removed, but the cancer still grows elsewhere in her body. In Dhilan's perception, elimination of the nourishing and nurturing organs of her body means that she remains a person, but not a functioning maternal figure. His mother's body, as a mechanism, is broken. Dhilan must eventually confront his feelings of shame for being repulsed by his mother's body.

As he tends to his mother during her days of chemotherapy treatment, he starts to develop a sense of unease towards her body. He also develops a foot fetish, as well as a fetish for surgery-themed pornography, which combines broken bodies and themes of death with sexual desire. These feelings cause him significant distress, leading him to search for support from online communities. Additionally, the fear of his aunt's predictions coming true and finding himself developing a sexual desire towards his mother drives him to seek refuge in the virtual realm, where he hopes to find a way to escape his fate. As he clicks and swipes his way through the Internet, he encounters several online communities, such as foot-fetish web forums and an Oedipal support group, where individuals express their unconventional sexual feelings. Initially, Dhilan thinks of these online communities as being self-help groups where individuals provide each other with advice and support. However, he soon realizes that such communities are often misused in two ways. Firstly, some members use them to post sexually objectifying content that is unrelated to the group's intended purpose. Secondly, some groups consist of like-minded individuals who reinforce each other's pre-existing fears and biases without ever challenging them. Consequently, despite being able to connect with others in similar situations, Dhilan is unable to discover a way to overcome his inner conflicts through his participation in these online communities.

Constantly bombarded by advertisements and images, Dhilan not only spends money to consume the items he purchases online, but also spends the majority of his time doing so. As Mark Fisher suggests, "Cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users" (2009: 25). Thus, in cyberspace consumerism thrives on the exploitation of users' attention and personal information by technology companies to generate profits. While users consume products, their personal data is also consumed and sold to help tailor advertisements directly to their desires. Strings of computer code called algorithms, essentially complex math equations, automatically interpret and classify

users in ways that determine their future purchases, clicks and thoughts. In cyberspace, Dhilan tries to overcome his fears regarding his obsession with his Oedipal fate, however, he only finds that the algorithm reinforces and amplifies those fears.

One of the novel's most enigmatic threads is the sporadic appearances of two elderly men who follow Dhilan around and lecture him about the dangers of cyberspace. The men never reveal their names, but Dhilan refers to them as "the botched-Botox man" and the "blankpage-Botox man" because of their peculiar, plastic-looking faces. Dhilan repeatedly questions whether they are a product of his imagination, and whether he is "delusionating," (78) when he sees them. His confrontations do not provide him with a dependable response, as the botox-men argue that their physical existence is not of significance. The blankpage-Botox man emphasizes the urgency of Dhilan's situation, given that his mother is severely ill, and he is unable to communicate with her. They warn him that "the clock is ticking and you're wasting time looking for a humdrum plot twist to get you out of this. Meanwhile the clock is ticking" (81). They try to rescue Dhilan from the fractured sense of reality and potential consequences of excessive reliance on technology caused by cyberspace, with one of the men noting "just a matter of mere time before all their clever digital architecture – the basis of your society – became one great big feedback machine for people's fears, anxieties, prejudice, anger, perversions, righteousness" (216).

In the novel, there are elements that suggest that the botox men do not have physical existence. For example, they are omniscient about every character in the novel. They also take on magical, non-human qualities, such as shedding pixels from their bodies. These supernatural characteristics indicate that the botox men are the creations of Dhilan's imagination, inspired by his interactions in cyberspace. When confronted by Dhilan, the botched-Botox man states that "even if you seriously think we're just some figment of one of your fictional online personas, you're forgetting that your fictional personas are real" (78-79). Indeed, it can be argued that these two characters are artifacts or reflections of Dhilan's other two personas. The spotless, shiny appearance of the blankpage-Botox man resembles Dhilan's Dillon persona, who displays a shallow, aloof, "blank-page" personality. On the other hand, the botched-Botox man and Dhilan's Dylan persona, created through his father's aspirations for him, bear resemblances. The phrase "botched-botox" suggests a

struggle to resist the degeneration brought on by time and failure. This symbol becomes more vivid when, towards the end of the novel, the botched-Botox man reveals that he has created a code that can eliminate the “personalized relevance” algorithm (323) which exploits Internet users’ personal information to provide search results tailored to their beliefs and interests. He claims that Dhilan’s father helped him plant these codes as antidotes to the algorithm through his articles. They were supposed to promote diverse opinions that are not only aligned with users’ existing beliefs. However, it was a failed attempt, hence the “botched” Botox. It is important to point out that, as the botox men also state, whether or not these characters are real, or figments of his imagination should not matter to him. The novel integrates the virtual and real, much like the Internet does. The two figures serve as a metaphor for the wider societal concerns about the impact of technology on identity, communication and interpersonal relationships.

In his novel, Malkani demonstrates the heightened presence of performativity, symbolic interactionism, and consumerism in cybercultural formations. Additionally, Dhilan’s character development emphasizes the importance of solitude which provides him with the space and clarity necessary to understand himself and others around him. Dhilan is only able to develop his ability to communicate effectively after taking time for self-reflection away from the constraints and demands of cyberspace. The experience enables him to become more receptive to diverse perspectives, which equips him to engage in meaningful conversation. Towards the conclusion of his journey, he attains a deeper understanding of his feelings and motivations by disconnecting from the online communities that only confirm and reinforce his preconceived notion and beliefs. By doing so, Dhilan becomes more receptive to diverse viewpoints which makes him better equipped to engage in meaningful conversations.

3.1. Fragmentation of Self and Distorted Reality

In cyberspace, Dhilan finds a means to perform multiple identities and escape the limitations of the physical world. His initial intention is to embark on a quest of self-discovery in cyberspace by projecting different aspects of himself onto the digital realm. However, his experience does not unfold as he had anticipated. The multiplicity of his online identities, each with its own distinct reality, leaves him with a fragmented

sense of self and distorts his perception of reality. His involvement using these identities in different online communities further exacerbates this distortion. Dhilan initially finds motivation in the acceptance and validation he receives from these spaces. But as the novel progresses, he realizes that these communities consist of like-minded individuals who share the same fears and prejudices. They continually reaffirm each other's beliefs without ever challenging them, becoming insular and closed off to alternative viewpoints. As a result, the more he delves into the online world, the more disconnected he feels from the offline world. His interactions in cyberspace disrupt his sense of reality in the physical world, rendering him incapable of communicating with those around him.

Sherry Turkle, a prominent voice of the studies of identity-formation in cyberspace, argues that:

We are insecure in our understanding of ourselves, and this insecurity breeds a new preoccupation with the question of who we are. We search for ways to see ourselves. The computer is a new mirror, the first psychological machine. Beyond its nature as an analytical engine lies its second nature as an evocative object. (2005: 270)

Indeed, Dhilan is driven by a deep-seated insecurity, which stems from his childhood overhearing of his aunts' prophecy, stating that "he will take the father's place" (22). Consequently, he is drawn to cyberspace with hopes to discover who he really is. His online personas provide him with distinct lenses through which he can examine his potential selves with a heightened level of scrutiny. At the very beginning of the novel, Dhilan explains to the reader:

My fones hit me up with different ads whether I'm logged on as Dillon or Dylan or Dhilan. Different ads, different Facebook stories, Google results, Youtube videos, different solutions ... You know how all the ads, stories and search results are custom-tailorised according to your own personal info? Well, trust me, yeh, you got no idea how proper fucked this can get – not unless you constantly compare your Facebook feed and your most top-secret Google results with an identical search or scroll by someone else. I do this on the regular for Dillon, Dylan and Dhilan to help me school up on the differences between them. Actually, scrap that – ain't just simply schooling up on each of them. More like stepping up to some next-level version of them. (12-13)

Dhilan's statement suggests that he wishes to be presented with an array of advertisements, video recommendations and images that would help him explore the different aspects of his online personas. By comparing the personalized content, he receives under his personas, he hopes to gain a greater understanding of how they are perceived by others. In this regard, as suggested by Turkle, each of Dhilan's phone

screens becomes a mirror, offering him means of reflection and introspection that is evocative and deeply personal. His thoughts become synthesized inside these “psychological machines.”

However, Dhilan’s effort to gain information about his identities in order to achieve a sense of self-development and perform “some next-level version of them” prove to be futile. As Turkle states: “[When] people fracture their sense of self into multiple online selves, they paradoxically produce a portfolio of singularities, rather than recognizing that multiplicity dwells within an individual self” (2005: 227). As such, Dhilan fails to integrate his multiple online identities into a more cohesive whole, due to the lack of coherence and connection between his personas.

This incoherence arises from Dhilan’s construction of separate realities in cyberspace through his three personas. His Dylan persona is heavily influenced by his work-oriented father and is passionate about his data-entry business. Using this persona, Dhilan spends time in online business forums and on Twitter, where he portrays himself as a successful businessman and a loving son who honours his dearly departed mother by dedicating his career to her memory. In one of his tweets, he shares with his followers that his business is thriving, and he may donate some of the profit to charity in memory of his late mother, using the hashtag “#RIPMum” (56).

While the reader already knows that his mother is not dead, we also learn from the botched-Botox man that Dhilan only works as a freelance data enterer for two small companies. When the botched-Botox man confronts Dhilan for the first time in the novel, he mocks him for his exaggeration of the success of his career, in online forums. He reminds Dhilan that he only works for a “little import–export company,” typing “twenty years of invoices into a basic database” and for a “dying newspaper” where he scans and edits “mistakes in an online archive of back issues” (55-56). He tells Dhilan that he lacks “the key ingredient for launching a start-up” which is “self-belief” (53). Given the novel’s insinuation that botched-Botox man is a product of Dhilan’s imagination, as evidenced by his supernatural characteristics, this scene depicts Dhilan confronting himself and his own insecurities. He recognizes that he has lost his sense of self-belief, as he persistently lies to construct favourable images of himself in cyberspace.

Dhilan's second online persona, Dillon, is influenced by his girlfriend Ramona. Through this persona, Dhilan performs what he believes Ramona would want him to embody. Dillon is an air-headed, carefree university student who enjoys tweeting about concerts and events that he does not always attend in person. We never read in the novel that Dhilan posts pictures. He only tweets and posts messages on web forums, enabling him to easily fabricate different realities for his followers. For example, on one occasion, he tweets on his Dillon account that he is "heading to John Legend's new album launch" (7) while he is in a taxi on his way to Acton to go see his mother, who had been readmitted to the hospital that evening because of her deteriorating health. Despite this personal crisis happening in reality, the Dillon persona continues to act carefree online. The fabricated online Dillon identity spills over into the real world and becomes the only way he can interact with Ramona. She does not know his real name, or his other two personas. She calls him Dillon. However, she hints that she is aware that he keeps his problems hidden from her. When Dhilan becomes silent, unable to communicate with her, she expresses her sympathy towards him saying "It's okay not to share everything about yourself" (88). She adds, "Only thing that matters is that you're all still Dillon" (88). Ramona's remarks reveal that she is concerned that Dhilan will lose his sense of a unified identity. Despite Ramona's compassionate attitude towards him, the botched-Botox man warns Dhilan that his dishonesty might cause him to lose Ramona. He states,

All that hard work, kid. All that running around and deception. All those years you were besotted with her – duping her into falling for Dillon, keeping her blissfully ignorant of Dhilan. ... despite all your underlying dishonesty and false advertising, Ramona still somehow gets you. I mean she truly seems to get you. That isn't the kind of connection a man should just let slip away" (79).

As this confrontation illustrates, Dhilan is worried that the alternate reality he created by using his Dillon persona to impress his girlfriend may ultimately alienate her. Although he wants to be honest with her, he finds it challenging to open up to her about his mother's illness and his aunts' prophetic utterances due to the traumatic nature of these experiences. Consequently, he struggles to articulate his feelings in physical life.

Dhilan finds it particularly difficult to communicate with Ramona the morning after spending the night with her. He explains the reason behind this, saying "Problem

is I just woke up. ... it's just I only ever dream as Dhilan" (75). When Dhilan wakes up, he feels as though his Dhilan identity becomes dormant. He admits to the reader that he waits for that sense of "Dillon-ness, manliness" (45) – a more confident and masculine version of himself – to set in before he feels ready to talk to her. The fact that Dhilan relies on this alternate persona to maintain his relationship with Ramona hinders their communication and makes it impossible for them to have meaningful conversations.

While Dhilan portrays happy, successful and uplifting lives through his Dylan and Dillon personas, it is only through his Dhilan persona that he allows himself to be vulnerable. His Dhilan persona is the most genuine and intimate, as indicated by his statement that he only dreams as Dhilan. Using his Dhilan accounts, he tweets and posts on the young carers community forum about his mother's illness and reports the ways he cares for her. However, like the posts in his other accounts, some of the posts he shares are imaginary. For instance, on one occasion, he tweets, "Mom is sick again. Gonna spend evening and night by her hospital bedside" with the hashtag "#YoungCarers" (7) even though he decides to spend the evening with Ramona. While Dhilan does occasionally care for his mother, he also makes up stories about his caregiving role in order to seek recognition and validation from the online community of young carers. According to Sherry Turkle, "the online setting increases the number of people to whom one applies for a caring response" (2011: 235). She writes that "when we make ourselves vulnerable, we expect to be nurtured. This is why people will sometimes, often prematurely, tell their 'sad stories' to others they hardly know. They hope to be repaid in intimacy" (2011: 235). As Dhilan is unable to share his mother's illness with Ramona and with those around him in real life, he seeks compassion in cyberspace, from individuals he hardly knows.

Another cybercommunity Dhilan joins seeking a caring response is an Oedipal support forum. Dhilan initially presumes this community to be a self-help group where individuals, dealing with issues related to the Oedipus complex, share their experiences and help one another overcome their problems. Soon, however, he becomes disillusioned, saying that "the supposed-to-be Oedipal support forum actually turned out to be just dickhead guys posting on-the-sly fotos of everyday MILFs" (108), a slang term that sexually objectifies mothers. Dhilan's disappointment with the

Oedipal support forum exemplifies how online communities can be misused by individuals who distort the purpose of the forum as a supportive community.

Furthermore, Dhilan reveals to the reader that he has also “been trying to get some support by clicking on them foot-fetish web forums” (148). By participating in these forums, people usually “just end up feeling validated” (148), Dhilan explains. Alternatively, he adds, if “you sign in under some different name and upload different personal details – and then it doesn’t validate or non-validate nothing, it just makes you feel like your freakism is someone else’s. Hated myself for clicking on all them other forums. Hated how the web always made me hate myself a little less” (148). Dhilan’s statements suggest that these online communities serve as both a source of validation and a platform for individuals to create personas to transfer the burden of their uncomfortable sexual feelings. Yet, Dhilan also recognizes that his participation in foot-fetish web forums does not provide a solution to the internal conflict he experiences while struggling with these feelings. Thus, as a sexually insecure teenager, Dhilan experiences a perpetual sense of ambivalence, torn between a strong desire for validation and a deeply held belief that he does not deserve it, leading to feelings of guilt when he receives validation.

Malkani leaves some aspects of Dhilan’s sexual angst and his interaction with Oedipal support groups and foot-fetish web forums unexplained and unevaluated. For example, when Dhilan expresses a desire for “support” from online forums (148), it is unclear whether he wishes to rid himself of these feelings he considers shameful or needs someone to assure him that his feelings are normal. He does not get either, but he continues his impulsive quest for finding answers in cyberspace, which he refers to as “the searching reflex” (317). In this way, the narration leaves the reader vicariously grappling with the ambivalence and confusion Dhilan endures.

Furthermore, Dhilan meticulously curates each of his persona’s online presences through what he refers to as “clickability,” (251) tailoring their interests and interactions to suit his desire to obtain a sense of belonging and acceptance in cyberspace. He states, “[At the] end of the day, everyone fronts differently when they’re in fonespace. Everyone’s like some rock star juggling a posse of different stage personas ... different usernames/profiles/zoological species. I just take it to some next

level is all” (18). This urge to perform “different stage personas” is inherently individualistic because it suggests that people are primarily concerned with their own personal expression and self-presentation online. This approach allows him to experience and engage in positive feedback from multiple communities who share the same interests as himself and his personas. However, this causes Dhilan to have connections that do nothing except support his pre-existing opinions, thereby eliminating disagreement and meaningful dialogue. Spanish scholar of Internet studies, Manuel Castells, refers to this new form “of sociability constructed around specific interests” in cyberspace, as “networked individualism” (131-132). The term represents two ideas. On the one hand, it suggests that cyberspace enables people to have connections that are free from the constraints of geographic proximity and traditional social ties. On the other hand, this freedom leads people to have relationships that only serve to support and reinforce their own ideas, leaving no room for debate or constructive discourse. Dhilan notices this very early in the novel, as he states:

I do know this probly means we just end up confirming our own shit – our fears and prejudgements. I know it means our deep-down secret thoughts get reinforced. I know the apps and websites try and keep our eyeballs locked on by showing us more of the stories, videos and info we wanna be shown and by telling us more of what we wanna hear. (19)

Dhilan acknowledges that he is solely obtaining gratification from these virtual communities rather than engaging in self-growth, yet he struggles to discover a path out of this cycle. The botched-Botox man warns Dhilan of the dangers of being unable to disentangle himself from online communities. He says that, in cyberspace, there is “no more coming across any pesky content you find boring or confusing or at odds with your own made-up mind” (35). He adds, “the more you click on the links, the more your dirty stinking twistedness is validated rather than challenged. Slowly, you start to feel a little less ashamed. You take strength from seeing like-minded people sharing like-minded content and from the sheer assortment of targeted products” (36). Dhilan’s tendency to click on links that align with his preconceived notions and beliefs leads him to shut out anything extrinsic. As Turkle observes: “it has been all too easy for virtual communities to encourage multiplicity but not coherence, with each individual persona having a limited, undiversified social range” (2005: 227). Thus, Dhilan experiences a limited reality that is confined to the echo chambers of like-

minded communities, which hinders both his own personal growth and open-mindedness.

In addition to his online personas, Dhilan starts a blog, keeping an online journal impersonating his mother. He also forms what he calls an “online alter-ego” (111) for her, authoring her alternative identity in cyberspace. By doing so, he aims to formulate realities in which his mother is happy and content with her life. Creating these happy alternative realities for his mother also shows Dhilan’s desire for control over a helpless situation, which is the impending death of his mother. Crafting his mother’s narrative gives him the power to shape the way she is perceived by others. This ambition to obtain a sense of power extends beyond managing his mother’s online image. Through formulating and preserving both his identity and his mother’s identity in cyberspace, Dhilan strives to realize a transformation of the body, and the utopian eradication of the pain of physical existence. He tries to erase his mother’s mortality by erasing her suffering, at least in the eyes of the Internet.

The concept of cyberspace as a realm beyond the physical body has been widely discussed in cyberculture studies. Donna Haraway, the writer of “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” posed the question “Why should our bodies end at the skin?” (1990: 220) to challenge the traditional boundaries of the human body. Since then, scholarly views on cyberspace have begun to shift from a focus on transcendental technological experiences towards whether a pursuit of immortality through digital and virtual experiences is viable. As Kathleen Woodward observes:

Over hundreds of thousands of years the body, with the aid of various tools and technologies, has multiplied its strength and increased its capacities to extend itself in space and over time. According to this logic, the process culminates in the very immateriality of the body itself. In this view technology serves fundamentally as a prosthesis of the human body, one that ultimately displaces the material body, transmitting instead its image around the globe and preserving that image over time. (50)

Similarly, Dhilan is motivated by the notion of the “immateriality” of the body. That is the idea that technology can transmit and preserve the image of the body around the world, even after the physical body itself ceases to exist. Carving her into a digital statue, more polished and pristine than she is in life, Dhilan strives to give her the chance at having an invulnerable and immortal body. The outcome, however, is not a transcendence from the body that liberates the self from the limitations of the physical world. It is rather a fragmentation and dismantling of reality which consumes the

protagonist to the point where he is unable to differentiate between what is virtual and what is real. As Woodward suggests, “The possibility of an invulnerable and thus immortal body is our greatest technological illusion – that is to say *delusion*” (51). Similarly, Dhilan’s struggle to live in between a life in cyberspace with his idealized, online mother and his decrepit offline mother causes him considerable mental anguish.

As Dhilan takes on the responsibility of caring for his mother, he becomes physically connected to her body. He starts experiencing mouth ulcers, similar to those of his mother, and they both frequently suffer from morning nausea. According to the French-Bulgarian literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, separation from mother’s body is crucial for the subject to enter the “symbolic order,” which is the system of language and culture that constitutes our reality. She refers to the process of separation from the mother as “abjection” (1982: 108). Dhilan’s physical link to his mother’s body indicates an unresolved experience of the abjection process. Dhilan’s persistent use of infantile language, such as “Mama” and “Daddy,” indicates a disrupted sense of language systems, thus, an incomplete transition into the symbolic order.

According to Kristeva, failure to separate from the mother’s body results in the “subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother” (64). The physical connection between Dhilan and his mother’s body therefore undermines his sense of self and induces intense anxiety. This manifests itself in Dhilan’s outbursts of anger and aggression during interactions with his mother.

Kristeva refers to maternal contaminants, as well as the corpse, as “pollution” (109) and writes that “the power of pollution ... transposes, on the symbolic level, the permanent conflict resulting from an unsettled separation between masculine and feminine power at the level of social institutions. Non-separation would threaten the whole society with disintegration” (78). We see that disintegration occur in Dhilan’s psychological breakdown. In a moment of outrage, Dhilan tells his mother that he does not see her bodily existence as his mother, stating “you’re too mashed up to be my mother” (316). Perplexed, his mother asks “What the hell nonsense are you talking, Dhilan? If I’m not your mother, then who the hell is your mother?” (316) Dhilan’s response is “‘I mean your Facebook page is. Your blog is, your Instagram is.’ Because digital content doesn’t die, etc. And cos, online or offline, women don’t actually have

to be defined by their bodies” (316). This symbolizes Dhilan’s desire to formulate a digitized mother without the memory of her decaying body. The version of his mother contained in his blog and his social media posts is one without the chaos and unpredictability of a living organism. As Sonia Fizek and Monika Wasilewska state:

Because the avatars do not secrete any fluids (and may be thus perceived as empty or two-dimensional only), the uncontrollable element of the female body—connected with leaking and lack of self-containment — is no longer in force. ... Lack of bodily fluids with reference to avatars may be also an interesting point, when it comes to the way body is (or bodies are) idealized in our culture—body as a stable object regulating the influence of fluids (in our case completely withstanding their influence) is perceived as pure and clean. Therefore, the virtual bodies ... may be regarded as superior to their real counterparts. (91)

Dhilan’s statement that he views his mother’s digital presence as his real mother implies the abjection of her physicality, establishing that he considers her virtual existence superior. For Dhilan, his mother does not have an identity in the physical world, which explains why the reader never learns her name from Dhilan. These attempts at digitizing her mother’s and his own identity, however, does not provide Dhilan with a transcendence from the body, but rather a dismantling of the self in cyberspace.

The sense of fragmentation that Dhilan experiences is evident in his life in the physical world. His experience in cyberspace impedes his ability to attain inner harmony and distorts his sense of reality offline. As a result, he finds himself unable to establish genuine connections with his father, mother, and girlfriend. Throughout the novel, there are several instances where Dhilan and another person attempt to engage in a face-to-face conversation, only to experience what Dhilan refers to as “screen-freeze” (126) moments. For instance, when Dhilan decides to take botox man’s advice and seek answers outside of cyberspace, he calls his father and asks him to meet at a McDonalds. His father, Ramnik, agrees to the meeting. But when they meet, they both have different recollections of who initiated the call. Dhilan tries to clarify, saying: “No, I mean are you the one who contacted me or was it me who contacted you?” (125). Ramnik, however, continues to assert that he made the call:

‘I’m sorry, Dylan, I’m not sure I follow.’ Checking about now like he reckons he’s on TV – like he thinks maybe someone’s playing one of them plebby prank-show pranks on him. ‘Dylan, of course I’m the one who phoned you. I phoned you, you picked up the phone, we agreed to meet and now we are here’
I try asking him again, even though I already know for definite that I was the one who called him and suggested this meet. (125)

After a prolonged attempt to convince the other party regarding who called who first, they lapse into silence. They become stuck in this cycle of miscommunication, unable to reconcile their different perceptions of reality. As posited by botched-Botox man, the implications of such a predicament are significant:

What kind of relationship can someone have if they can't enter a shared reality? And even beyond your mother's perspective, what about that of other people in your life? Because once you let go of relevance, you'd be surprised at the things that turn out to be much more relevant. (327)

According to the botched-Botox man Dhilan's inability to enter a shared reality with others stems from his reliance on the "user relevance" (217) algorithm prevalent in cyberspace. He suggests that by breaking free from the constraints of the user relevance algorithm, which only presents stories and information deemed relevant to Dhilan's user data and search history, he could potentially broaden his exposure to other realities and communicate more effectively with others.

Dhilan's inclination to frequently shift between multiple online personas impedes his ability to establish substantial personal relationships in the physical world. When his girlfriend attempts to communicate with him, he does not want to respond to her. To the reader, he offers the excuse that he was engrossed in reading a blog post he wrote several years ago:

I was reading a random blog post from a random month four or five years back – back when the blog I wrote from my mum's perspective first started contradicting whatever reassuringness she was saying to my face. Just reading it like some children's bedtime story that I wrote for myself. Weighing up whether to click open the ads and recommended articles, or whether to first wait for Ramona to fall asleep. (151)

The scene illustrates that Dhilan's preoccupation with the digital world creates a barrier to developing meaningful personal relationship with his girlfriend.

Moreover, as the above quotation suggests, the alternate realities that Dhilan creates for his mother through her online journal blurs the lines between his actual experiences and the ones he has concocted for her. As he continuously revisits the journal, his memories become distorted, and he starts to recall events as they were written, rather than how they actually occurred. During a heated argument between Dhilan and his mother, they reminisce about his first day at college, which only Dhilan remembers as a joyous occasion. He states:

Didn't I used to buy you flowers, Mummy? All those battered bunches. Everyone buys flowers for people in hospital, but I got you that bunch after my first day at uni, even

though you were back in remission. You wrote in your blog that it was the happiest moment of your life.

Didn't you?

Didn't you? (267)

The blog proves to be an unreliable record for Dhilan. When his mother confronts him, she tells him that he often appears depressed and irritable when he visits her from college. In her perception, he does not manifest as a fond and expressive offspring who presents her with flowers; rather, he appears as a brooding and temperamental adolescent. This lack of dependability in Dhilan's memories is further highlighted when his mother confronts him about his demeanor at her birthday party. She says, "Dhilan, when everyone came here to the house, they all said you looked so angry. So angry that it scared them. Other people noticed it too, not just me – other people said you looked angry. Always hiding your handsome face behind the phone camera" (294). Dhilan, however, recounts the party as a happy occasion. He recalls encouraging her to smile for the camera, saying "Come on, Mama, don't be shy. Look over here and smile for the camera. Can't you see how hard I'm trying to smile behind it?" (265). Although Dhilan is reluctant to acknowledge his angry demeanour during his mother's birthday, his aunts confront him with a compelling video evidence that depicts him as being visibly incensed. They urge Dhilan to watch the video footage and observe his conduct for himself: "And here – look – you look like you're at a funeral. ... See? And see there? You see that? And even when she cut her cake – see what kind of atmosphere you're creating?" (243). This episode serves to illustrate how Dhilan's memory distorts his perception of reality.

Dhilan's attempts to use the camera to encourage his mother to smile, and thereby portray her birthday party as a joyful event, reflect his desire to construct a particular image of himself and his family. However, the video record presented by his aunts challenges this construction, revealing the underlying tensions and conflicts that were present at the event. The video of the birthday party questions his ability to accurately recall comments and his own experiences. The distortion of memory is a feature of the digital age that Malkani explores. Fisher writes, "In conditions where realities and identities are upgraded like software, it is not surprising that memory disorders should have become the focus of cultural anxiety," (2009: 64) Mark Fisher writes. For Dhilan, the uncertainty about the reliability of his memory generates

anxiety and destabilizes his sense of self. It creates a sense of impermanence and inconsistency in his memories, making it difficult for him to construct a cohesive narrative of his life.

3.2. Evolution of Symbols in the Digital Age

In the realm of cyberspace, Dhilan utilizes symbols to create his online personas. As he increasingly relies on these symbols to make sense of the world around him, he begins to seek out similar symbols in the physical world as a means of bridging the gap between the two realms. For Dhilan, communicating effectively without these signs and symbols in his real life proves to be challenging. His consumption patterns and language use are influenced by these symbols he employs in cyberspace, which extends into his physical life. Moreover, the symbols developed in cyberspace have a propensity to be addictive to their users. Tech and social media companies leverage this addiction to generate revenue by collecting user data, thus driving consumer culture on a vast scale and at a blinding speed. Eventually, Dhilan notices that in the confinements of the symbol-ridden cyberspace, he had been both spending his time and money and being consumed both in terms of his data and his sense of reality.

In cyberspace, symbols emulate real-life objects but are condensed into icons that can be easily accessed by a single click. Turkle observes the critical role of symbols in identity formation within the digital domain:

On the Web, the idiom for constructing a 'home' identity is to assemble a 'home page' of virtual objects that correspond to one's interests. One constructs a home page by composing or 'pasting' on it words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites on the Internet or the Web. Like the agents in emergent AI, one's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections. People link their home page to pages about such things as music, paintings, television shows, cities, books, photographs, comic strips, and fashion models. (1995: 258)

Dhilan creates his Dhilan, Dylan and Dillon personas through these symbols, namely, home pages, usernames, friends and followers on different social media sites and forums in an effort to obtain a sense of belonging within various cyber communities. As users within these communities interact with one another, they do so through a variety of symbols, including emojis, gifs, avatars. As Castells observes, "the Internet [is] a medium of selective social interaction and symbolic belonging" (37) Indeed, engaging with cyberspace is a symbol-laden experience, enabled by the abundance of symbols that have come to define it. The attraction of this space derived from the

ability of users to express themselves through the manipulation and creation of symbols that represent their identities, whether they represent a real person or fictional construction of a persona. These symbols also help users find others with shared interests or problems.

The novel emphasizes the significance of various symbols, including the torch, binoculars, and magnifying glass, which Dhilan perceives as essential tools to assist him in his pursuit of finding answers in the real world, rather than solely in the virtual world. Dhilan buys a “brand-new top of the range torch,” (104) however, he states that he does not know the purpose of this purchase, saying “still dunno why I even need a torch” (94). The search engines, where he is used to get all the information instantly, enable its users to find answers through clicking on these icons. Dhilan, almost in a state of hypnosis, presumes that he needs one in physical life to gather information. A torch or flashlight symbol sometimes features as a search icon on computer interfaces. His online purchase of a very expensive torch also suggests that cyberspace still determines his consumption patterns. He believes that the more money he spends, the more effective or “premium” his experience will be. This perception is indicative of the persistent influence of digital space on his individual behaviour and consumer patterns.

The botched-Botox man recognizes the urgency for Dhilan to address his personal issues in real life and disengage from cyberspace. He finds that “twenty-five bucks for a single function flashlight is pretty steep for a student,” and offers to give Dhilan “a single function watch or alarm clock” (135). These items are symbolic of the need for Dhilan to become more aware of the passage of time and take concrete actions to have a sense of coherent reality, particularly given his mother’s limited time left. The botched-Botox man states that:

I don’t need a flashlight or magnifying glass icon to see that youre trying to make things right. But you got no idea what it is you are trying to rectify. You already know that exercising your intelligence without being in full possession of all the information is worse than ignorance. (138)

In his capacity as Dhilan’s spirit guide, the botched-Botox man tells him that, in order to form meaningful relationships in real life, one must not only seek out information that aligns with his preconceived notions but investigate all available information and look for different perspectives. Although Dhilan is eager to take the botched-Botox

man's advice and expose himself to different perspectives in the physical world, he still feels compelled to purchase a torch to satisfy his need for symbols to navigate his way through physical space. This exemplifies how deeply ingrained the symbolic language of cyberspace has become in Dhilan's perception of the world.

The symbol-dominated world of cyberspace also influences Dhilan's linguistic patterns. Throughout the novel, he speaks through the neologisms of the cyberspace. This indicates that he is in a state where the distinction between his online and offline experience and behaviour has fused together. Dhilan uses these words to express this experience, which he finds impossible to adequately express through the existing language. For Dhilan, being asleep is "set to sleep mode," (224) yelling or screaming is leaving one's voice on "caps-lock," (88) or being "set to loudspeaker mode," (47) thinking or trying to remember is "mentally scrolling through," (110) imagining or visualising is "mentally photoshopping," (185) being silent is going "total mute button," (124) remembering is "scrolling back to a time" (110). These neologisms and many more show how Dhilan's experiences of symbols in cyberspace have altered his way of thinking and expressing himself, to the point where they shape his very language and therefore his perception of the world.

While cyberspace offers Dhilan a wealth of images and symbols to create connections and perform multiple identities, it also fosters addiction. The overstimulation of the digital world, with its constant flow of information, contributes to users searching for a sense of pleasure and reward similar to the release of dopamine in the brain, from a validating online interaction. Moreover, the constant feeding of data into cyberspace perpetuates this cycle of dependency. Regarding the effects of Internet on human interaction, Sherry Turkle states:

I share, therefore I am. We use technology to define ourselves by sharing our thoughts and feelings as we're having them. We used to think, "I have a feeling; I want to make a call." Now our impulse is, "I want to have a feeling; I need to send a text. So, in order to feel more, and to feel more like ourselves, we connect. But in our rush to connect, we flee from solitude, our ability to be separate and gather ourselves. Lacking the capacity for solitude, we turn to other people but don't experience them as they are. It is as though we use them, need them as spare parts to support our increasingly fragile selves. (2012: 3)

Indeed, Dhilan wishes to form as many connections as possible in cyberspace, to avoid being in solitude, as being alone with his thoughts means that he has to face the

difficult realities of his life, such as his struggle to communicate and have a constructive relationship with his mother.

Furthermore, Dhilan's profession as a data enterer highlights his contribution to the replication of stories and digitization. Drawing on the theories of Baudrillard, the act of data entry can be seen as participating in a technological simulation of reality, in this case physical newspapers now deemed obsolete by their publisher. Baudrillard argues that simulation emerges "by crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials - worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning" (2). From this perspective, data entry can be understood as a symbolic act that generates a replica of reality, transporting it through space and time without physical limitations. Stories, at their most basic level, are replications of reality. The data entry worker's task is to keep thousands of stories alive by putting them into digital formats and then the replication machine of the Internet. These stories, then, have a chance at eternal life, by shedding their physicality and escaping death. The botched-Botox man describes how the stories and their preservation form the bedrock of both society at large and individual people as follows:

You know what I love about media business everything is a story. A celebrity overdoses and it isn't simply a death, it's a story. ... Even the money in your wallet is a story. The state declares that this piece of paper is worth twenty pounds sterling and their story becomes true. Then they say that the on-screen digital digits are worth the same as the paper notes and then *that* story becomes true. Same applies to nation states themselves, of course. And of course, the same applies to a person. But it's only in the media business that people talk openly about these things - every little thing and every big thing - in terms of their story-ness. (114)

The botched-Botox man indicates that the signs and symbols in cyberspace (such as digits of numbers that indicate money) make themselves real, despite being in the digital realm. Just like national identities, individual identities are constructed through the stories people tell about themselves. Dhilan's ability to create and manage multiple online personas with distinct stories speaks to the malleability and fluidity of digital identities, which are still in a sense "real" despite being nothing more than a story. Dhilan formulates each of his online personas in cyberspace through stories, and all three personas have different stories, ambitions, personalities, and different experiences of reality. And these identities, although fabricated by Dhilan, take on lives of their own online.

The research conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s by members of Warwick University's now closed Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) employs the term "hyperstition" to define such stories that become real through repetition and positive feedback loops in cyberspace, thus impacting reality (CCRU, 25). The CCRU explains the term "hyperstition" as follows: "Element of effective culture that makes itself real, through fictional quantities functioning as time-travelling potentials. Hyperstition operates as a coincidence intensifier" (330). Unlike superstitions, which remain fictions, hyperstitions become real through replication and, crucially, feedback. As an example, they point to the very space of the Internet (164) which was once a fiction but became real through interaction and positive feedback of individuals. Another study by Yves Citton names "conspiracy theories," and "the multiplication of 'fake news'" among examples of hyperstition (6).

The element of hyperstition can be traced in Malkani's incorporation of Dhilan's three aunts in the novel. The scene reminds the reader of Shakespeare's play **Macbeth** where the three witches prophesize about Macbeth's impending doom. This part of the novel is also a symbolic depiction of the way hyperstition is shaping human behaviour, even if it is the product only of rumor or hearsay. Dhilan narrates as he peeks at his aunts chatting through the gap in the doorway:

Pakora-filling spilling from the gaps in their teeth. None of them realising they'd got mint chutney on their chins. Or that their chins were in need of waxing. They'd brought ice-cream tubs full of green-chilli pakoras that looked more like ready-fried reptiles. Some big black cooking pot the size of a toilet. (22)

The vivid imagery of reptile-looking food symbolizes the animal ingredients with which witches cook (Shakespeare, 4.1.10-15). The big black cooking pot represents the famous cauldron in the play. Along with these symbols, the aunts' "Jewelry jangling, make-up bubbling, forks scraping empty plates" (22) connect the scene to Shakespeare's work. What links the scene to the hyperstitional aspect of virtual media is that all three aunts are physically connected to screens while making the prophecy: "First aunty's hand placed flat against the TV, second aunty's hand against the PC monitor, third aunty touching a laptop screen" (23).

In one of his flashbacks, Dhilan recalls the prophecy he heard: "The son will take the father's place. ALWAYS THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS – THE GOOGLY-ENGINE IT SAYS THIS. THE FACEBOOK STORY SAYS HE WILL GO OFF THE

RUFFIAN RAILS” (222). Indeed, the prophecy is the product of an alleged Google search, further connecting it to cyberspace. As a symbolic illustration of the operating system of hyperstitions, Dhilan is fixated on this story and constantly seeks feedbacks in cyberspace. His fixation intensifies because targeted algorithms recognize his interest and show him more and more information relevant to the subject, driving the obsession. As Malkani’s incorporation of Shakespeare’s **Macbeth** into the story indicates, Dhilan is struggling with the question of free will versus fate in cyberspace. Both Dhilan and Macbeth fear a looming doom and the reference serves to highlight how age-old philosophical questions in literature about self and society are still relevant in the digital age.

Malkani’s novel effectively employs metaphors and symbols to convey the intricacies of how cyberspace operates. For instance, the protagonist Dhilan’s frequent visits to McDonald’s with his girlfriend - and later with his father - symbolize the instant gratification that cyberspace promises. The symbol underscores the idea of accessing information instantaneously as one can in cyberspace. The healthiness of fast food is an analogy for the dangers of fast information. Later in the novel, the botched-Botox man is portrayed as “chucking a sachet of sugar into his coffee without actually opening the sachet” (322) in McDonald’s, thereby embodying the heightened sense of instant gratification that cyberspace offers to its users.

This observation aligns with the perspective of Fisher who points to the all-pervasive nature of the “instant” in the digital realm, where users expect to have access to any information or service immediately. Fisher observes that, in digital age “to be bored simply means to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand” (2009: 23-24). Thus, the constant feeding of data into cyberspace serves to perpetuate this cycle of dependency. The more data that is uploaded, the more compelling the digital world becomes, and the more difficult it is to disengage from it.

Fisher further discusses the concepts of control and power in cybercultures:

The slogan that the *Big Brother* TV show uses – ‘You decide’ – captures perfectly the mode of control by feedback that, according to Baudrillard, has replaced old, centralized forms of power. We ourselves occupy the empty seat of power, phoning and clicking in our responses. We the audience are not subjected to a power that comes from outside; rather, we are integrated

into a control circuit that has our desires and preferences as its only mandate - but those desires and preferences are returned to us, no longer as ours, but as the desires of the big Other. (2009: 54-55)

The big Other represents the social and cultural forces that shape and define our sense of self and operates through the illusion of choice and participation. In cyberspace, individuals participate in this system through their actions and responses, and the illusions of choice and participation further entrench the power of the big Other. Notably, what sets advertisements and stories in cyberspace apart from traditional forms of advertising, such as TV or leaflets, is the constant feedback loops they receive from users. The algorithm shows users the advertisement specifically designed for them, based on their data.

Dhilan reflects on this aspect of cyberspace, saying “maybe all these ads, stories and search results are trying to tell me something. ... But seeing as how all the ads and stories are custom-tailorized by my own search history, ... does that mean that I’m the one who’s telling me something?” (29) Dhilan feels that he is under constant surveillance which makes him feel anxious but, at the same time, he seeks validation from this system of surveillance. He confesses to the botched-Botox man, stating:

I’m *glad* all my shit’s being monitored. Like as if I wanna be measured and evaluationed – under the scope of some great big watchful dataflow up in the clouds. Just to know that someone or something is keeping the score. Clocking that my bad clicks are outgunned by my good clicks. That I gave money to a beggar in the street. That I’m sorry – that I’m so, so sleepstipated and sorry. (61)

This quotation poignantly demonstrates how much Dhilan yearns for recognition of his selfhood in a space where judgement comes from all sides and control over that judgement is not centralized by institutions but managed by an all-pervasive algorithm. In such a context, as Fisher suggests, “the big Other has never functioned more effectively” (2019: 118). Despite the impersonal and enigmatic nature of the big Other in cyberspace, Dhilan desires its recognition for his good deeds and intentions.

As the above quotation suggests, Dhilan opens up to the botched-Botox man, admitting that he wishes to be monitored to obtain a sense of validation. In response, the botched-Botox man emphasizes how excessive surveillance restricts his ability to act independently, as his actions are both predicted and influenced in cyberspace. The botched-Botox man states “of course, obviously all this predictive digital data has been good for tech giants and insurers and credit agencies and security services, but is it

good for people?” (182) He further explains the prophetic aspect of the search engines as follows: “the holy grail of search engineering is to be able to answer the question What shall I do next? Not merely what should I purchase or click or watch or read or think or visit or study or eat or date” (182). Ironically, as botched-Botox man tells Dhilan about how cyberspace influences user’s behaviour, Dhilan receives personalized advertisements on his mobile phone. Dhilan states, “Now an ad for custom-tailorised advertising. An article about surveillance capitalism. ... Now an ad for a recommended story” (320). As this level of customization and personalization is unprecedented in traditional mass media such as television and newspapers, cyberspace has created a new paradigm in which consumerism is seamlessly integrated into the everyday experiences of users.

Consumerism becomes reciprocal in this context through the use of personalized data and algorithms that create a two-way interaction between consumers and businesses. As Lupton suggests “While there is an increasing move towards the consumption of technologies, there is also anxiety around the technologies’ capacity to consume us” (106). This is evident in Dhilan’s experience, as he develops an addiction to online forums thanks to the algorithms that encourages repeated use. Also, the more data that is collected about him, the more precisely algorithms target his preferences and the more effective they become in directing him towards particular products, services, or experiences.

Dhilan searches for a path out of this cycle and the botched-Botox-man advises him to travel to a location disconnected from the Internet, where he cannot reach these digital spaces. As mentioned before, the botched-Botox man appears as a part of Dhilan’s self and represents Dhilan’s inner dialogues and conflicts. He wishes for Dhilan to discover a sense of unity within himself. Dhilan, following the botched-Botox man’s suggestion, decides to venture underneath an underground storage unit at the news outlet where he works, knowing that there will be “no signal” and “no data allowance” (175). In such solitude, Dhilan is able to disconnect from his mobile phones and search for ways to understand and connect with others outside of the digital realm. Turkle believes that the capacity for empathy, which is disturbed by technology, can be resolved in seclusion. She writes:

In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say. ...When we are secure in ourselves, we are able to listen to people and really hear what they have to say. And then in conversation with other people we become better at inner dialogue. ... Solitude reinforces a sense of secure self, and with that, the capacity for empathy. Then, conversation with others provides rich material for self-reflection. Just as alone we prepare to talk together, together we learn how to engage in a more productive solitude. Technology disrupts this virtuous cycle. The disruptions start with solitude. (2015: 14-15)

In other words, solitude fosters knowledge of self, which in turn fosters the ability to connect with others as distinct individual counterparts. This process allows for productive communication. However, the Internet's intrusive and addictive nature disrupts this cycle by leaving no room for solitude.

The storage unit, chosen by Dhilan as a place of refuge from cyberspace, also has symbolic significance. That's where the firm, for which he does data entry, stores its physical files and archives. The reader is also informed that, in the storage unit, "one of the ventilation shafts has been rigged to double as a chimney for an incinerator," (282) allowing the old files to be incinerated there. Even though the physical files are being destroyed by burning, data entry employees like Dhilan digitize these files. Digital replication promises the immortality of information. As such, keeping with the theme of the anxiety towards the physical, Malkani sets the novel inside the process of destroying physical information and creating digital replicas. In this sense, the newspaper's storage unit, where the yellowing, decaying papers are kept, is analogous to the physicality of the human body. Just as the newspaper is being immortalized in digital format by the data enterers, Dhilan attempts to upload his mother's identity into cyberspace to immortalize her.

Dhilan refers to the large storage unit as "the mother of all storage facilities" (92) and describes its interior as follows: "Each section bolted together like some ribcage made of steel ridges. ... the paintwork is rusted and faded and blistered and ulcerated." (92) Dhilan's mother also suffers from mouth ulcers, and the decaying condition of the unit is a symbol of his mother's physical deterioration. Thus, his description further connects the facility to the fragility and impermanence of the body. In this sense, Dhilan's decision to go under the storage unit represents not only a departure from the digital world, but also a symbolic confrontation with the physical realm.

Dhilan goes under the storage unit twice. The first time he goes there, he stumbles upon a collection of articles which have been written under his father's name, but much of the writing is illegible because they were blacked out with marker. The incident confuses Dhilan, as he did not know that his father used to work as a journalist in the newspaper company where now Dhilan himself works as a data enterer. Therefore, when Dhilan discovers his father's blacked out articles, he realizes how little he knows about him. Then, he starts to question why he had never been able to get to know his father better and concludes: "It's cos Google didn't have an answer. Proper scoped everywhere – using different combos of different search tools, different search words, different search engines" (89). Thus, Dhilan's experience of solitude under the storage unit leads him to realize that he has been relying heavily on search engines to gather information about himself and the people in his life. However, these engines prove insufficient in helping him learn about his father. Dhilan's experience of solitude in the storage unit makes him realize that he has to engage in conversation with his father to find out about his story. He contemplates the idea of going to his fathers' house, as he explains to the reader:

Technical term for this shit is 'doorstepping'. Probly saw it in some film about a journalist. Clark Kent for the Daily Planet in Superman. Peter Parker for the Daily Bugle in Spider-Man. Vicki Vale for the Gotham Globe in Batman. All of them scooped to the post by Lois Lane. When someone gets busted and won't talk to the press, go to their front door. ... Knock. Talk through the letter box. *Your side of the story, sir.* (150-151)

Thus, in the storage unit, Dhilan plans to engage in a conversation with his father, preparing to listen to his side of the story, regarding the blacked-out articles.

Dhilan, then acts out his plan and confronts his father in person. This indicates that he has reached a point where he is able to listen to other people's perspectives. His father tells him that his stories were blacked out because he included fake names and fake quotes in his stories and, eventually, his editors caught him. However, he explains, he started to realize that other journalists were writing the same names and quotes he had fabricated, but this time they had somehow become true. He explains:

'So let me speak plainly with you, son: what happened with my stories was a major paranormal phenomenon. ... by making things up, I was somehow making it come true – and all the other journalists on other publications were genuinely reporting that truth' ... Dad tells me how he even did a few experiments, making up more and more ridiculous eyewitness quotes. For instance: 'We never spoke to the last occupant but sometimes we saw her walking her baby elephant.' And yet, each time he did this, all his fake shit ended up actually being spoken by genuine eyewitnesses at random news incidents and then reported in other publications. (231)

The blacked-out stories, then, exemplify the operating process of hyperstitions in cyberspace. His father's writing conjures something in the real world from just a few lines of text. The replication by other journalists has the effect of making these events real, through a narrative feedback loop described by CCRU's research on hyperstition. As CCRU theorizes, "self-fulfilling prophecy is a positive-feedback circuit" (CCRU, 20-25).

The second time Dhilan goes under the storage unit, he goes there with his father. Worried that his blacked-out stories may be digitized in the future, Dhilan's father wants to burn the physical copies of his stories, along with the other files in the storage unit. Dhilan agrees to help his father. While they are there, Dhilan questions his father about the reason of his separation from Dhilan's mother. At first, he claims that they grew apart for no reason. But when Dhilan insists on questioning him, his father makes the following revelation, referring to his wife's mastectomy surgery: "But then that horrible operation and I'm sorry, Dhilan, I'm really sorry, but I'm now beginning to realise that maybe that's the real reason I started growing apart from her" (470). His father also confesses that he didn't realize this about himself before their conversation. This successful catharsis shows how face-to-face "conversation with others provides rich material for self-reflection" (Turkle, 2015: 15).

The self-reflection is mutual for both characters. His father's revelation makes Dhilan realize that he also grew apart from his mother because of his feeling of anxiety towards her transformed body. Considering that Dhilan's mother's body is a representation of the physical world, this episode further highlights the desire to transcend the physical world and the characters' discomfort with it. The clarity and sincerity of this conversation helps Dhilan put his own thoughts in perspective and understand the source of his own behaviour towards his mother. After struggling with superficial, validating online interactions that distorted his perception of reality, he finally achieves an honest but painful epiphany about himself.

He then decides to leave the storage unit, without helping his father burn the physical copies of his articles. He states:

LEFT MY OLD man in the external storage facility. Told him I'd got me some 5am breakfast lecture/seminar/business meeting. Figured it was okay to lie to him so long as the lie was

obvious. Besides, if I'd stuck around, we'd have had all that single-file weirdness while I followed him out, and I'm done with following him. (318)

As mentioned earlier, the storage unit represents the physical world and the human body. On a symbolic level, Dhilan's decision not to burn the articles indicates that this experience leads him to come to terms with the physical world. Moreover, Dhilan further strengthens this idea by stating that he will no longer follow his father, who is estranged from his mother due to his anxiety towards her body. At the end of the novel, Dhilan narrates his future path as being clear ahead of him, "I can walk through the ticket turnstiles now. The Piccadilly line – a straight line. Today an even straighter line. ... I'm ready to go back to Acton now" (323) Since Acton is where his mother lives, Dhilan's penultimate words in the novel indicate he will no longer avoid his mother and will try to build a closer relationship with her.

In conclusion, the novel **Distortion** offers valuable insights into the impact of the new medium of cyberspace on collective formations. Through the character of Dhilan, the novel shows how the Internet can amplify performativity, symbolic interactionism, and consumerism. Malkani utilizes hallucinatory and magical imagery to show this merger of offline and online realities. Dhilan's engagement with various online communities, including the young careers community, Oedipus forums, and young entrepreneur's "start-up" circle, demonstrates how individuals can formulate and perform multiple identities in the non-linear, timeless digital domain. By creating alternate realities and multiple identities both for himself and for his mother in cyberspace, Dhilan tries to overcome the physical limitations and frailties of his own body as well as that of his ill mother. Instead, he finds his fears and anxiety amplified as his sense of self dismantles in the cyberspace. Because his multiple identities and realities become more and more incoherent and distinct, they depend on Dhilan's constant acts of performativity. This dependence fuels his addiction to cybercommunities, leading to surveillance by algorithms that perpetuate consumerism on an unprecedented scale. The ending of the novel underscores how the liberating experience, which he initially seeks in cyberspace, can only happen in the solitude afforded by unplugging from these virtual worlds. Only by disconnecting from the Internet can Dhilan effectively develop his communication skills, leading to a deeper

understanding of his feelings and motivations, and a greater openness to himself and others.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study has been to illustrate the ways Malkani's novels, **Londonstani** and **Distortion**, reflect the evolution of cultural identities in their respective times. By analyzing these novels through the lens of subcultural, post-subcultural, and cybercultural theories, this study has aimed to shed light on the similarities and differences in cultural identities that these novels depict.

The protagonists of **Londonstani** and **Distortion**, Jas and Dhilan, both seek to find a sense of belonging within collective formations. They each construct their identities through performative acts and the use of symbols to achieve this sense of belonging. However, both Jas and Dhilan eventually become disillusioned with the collective formations they strive to be a part of, realizing that these formations are limiting and lead them to lose touch with reality. Furthermore, this study aims to demonstrate how performative acts, the use of symbols, and a distorted sense of reality take on an even more pronounced role in **Distortion**, particularly in the context of cyberspace as a setting for the novel.

In this thesis, Jas's performative acts have been analyzed across three categories: performance of ethnicity, gender, and language. Jas's familiarity with Indian traditions, his specific references to Bollywood movies and Indian cuisine, and his use of a hybrid language blending Punjabi and Hindi phrases effectively mask his white British heritage. Only towards the end of the novel does the reader find out that he is a white British teenager. Malkani's choice to present Jas as a first-person unreliable narrator highlights the extent to which individuals can employ performative acts to embody and express their desired cultural identities. In this regard, Jas's performativity aligns with the post-subcultural understanding of collective identity formation. He formulates an entirely fictional identity for himself through his conscious performance of an ethnic identity.

It has been observed that the desi rudeboys have a different approach to their cultural background compared to early ethnicity-based subcultural groups, who utilized their creativity for self-expression and political statements. The desi rudeboys, on the other hand, use their ethnic background to maintain a sense of superiority. They lack the political salience, economic disadvantage, and artistic creativity that shaped

the early subcultures. As pointed out above, subcultural knowledge serves as a valuable resource for contemporary youth cultures to differentiate themselves and assert a sense of superiority. This notion resonates with Jas's pursuit of understanding and embracing the desi rudeboy identity, as he wishes to leverage his desi subcultural knowledge to establish a sense of belonging and power among the desi rudeboys.

For the same purpose, Jas also clumsily displays a hypermasculine gender performance that he learns by closely observing the behaviour of the other desi rudeboys. The desi rudeboys' performative display of hypermasculinity serves as a means of projecting invulnerability and asserting their place within their community.

The linguistic performativity of the desi rudeboys has been further examined through the lens of the post-subcultural perspective. It becomes evident that the desi rudeboys adhere to a collective language pattern, blending elements of UK street slang, Punjabi terms, American Hip-Hop terminology, Jamaican slang, and texting language. This amalgamation of multicultural sources within the linguistic repertoire of the desi rudeboys exemplifies the fragmentation and fluidity inherent in post-subcultural formations, in contrast to the singularity and relative symbolic stability of early subcultures.

In **Distortion**, performativity of identity ascends to a new level, characterized by heightened fragmentation and fluidity. In contrast to **Londonstani**, categorizing the performativity in **Distortion** based on ethnicity, gender, and language prove to be challenging due to the absence of coherence in Dhilan's performativity. The desi rudeboys construct a fragmented yet coherent post-subcultural identity by borrowing from various cultures. On the other hand, in cyberspace, Dhilan is able to divide his identity into three different personas, each associated with three different names. For instance, his Dylan persona portrays a busy and successful businessman, while his Dillon persona embodies a festive and sociable extrovert. Through these personas, Dhilan engages with different communities that align with the characteristics embodied by each of these fabricated identities.

Both Jas and Dhilan embark on the construction of new identities due to their belief that their innate dispositions are not accepted or valued by society. However, while Jas tries to shape the way he is perceived by others in physical space, Dhilan tries to do the same in cyberspace. As a result, they come up with different solutions.

Jas, in his quest for acceptance among the desi rudeboys, suppresses his former cerebral self, adapting his behaviour to conform to their expectations. He believes that by embracing a hypermasculine identity and concealing his intellectual side, he will gain acceptance within the desi rudeboys.

On the other hand, Dhilan adopts a different approach. Rather than suppressing a part of himself, he looks for communities where his personas would be validated. For instance, his Dhilan persona is the one that is closest to his own character, that of a nineteen-year-old who is struggling with his mother's illness. Through this persona, Dhilan allows himself to be vulnerable and open about his mother's health issues. Dhilan is careful not to take on this persona in his physical life, but in cyberspace, he finds communities where his Dhilan persona is accepted and validated.

Malkani is clear that the individual is at the centre of these novels. Each character's quests for involvement in a community prove to be individualistic. In this regard, the collective formations in which they strive to find a sense of belonging, differ from the early subcultural formations. The ideas of group-mindedness, solidarity and loyalty, that shaped the early youth cultures, are not present in these contemporary manifestations of identity for young people. Jas seeks involvement within desi rudeboys as a way to be seen as powerful, by associating himself with a feared group after spending years being bullied as an outcast among his peers. Dhilan desires not only a sense of validation in cyberspace, but also aspires to transcend the physical constraints of the body. He creates digital identities for himself and his mother, as well as an intricate network of friends for each persona, with the ultimate goal of freeing them from the confinements of the physical world. However, the freedom to connect in cyberspace, without the constraints of geography, leads Dhilan to connect with people who support and reinforce his own beliefs. This phenomenon, referred to as "networked individualism" results in a lack of exposure to diverse perspectives. Consequently, these networks primarily serve to provide validation and reaffirmation, hindering Dhilan's personal growth and limiting his ability to broaden his understanding of the world.

Thus, both novels serve as coming-of-age stories that are relevant and relatable for a time of rapid cultural and technological change where young people struggle to navigate mediatized or cybercultural identities. Both the post-subculture of the desi-

rudeboys in **Londostani** and the cybercultural communities in which Dhilan participates in **Distortion** are limiting and restrictive collective formations. They demand adherence from their members to sets of codes and rules predetermined within these communities. Because post-subcultures and cybercultures are embedded within mainstream society, Jas and Dhilan's eventual rejections of these formations become acts of subversion. Jas discovers the key to his liberation through his friendship with Samira and Arun, who introduce him to the possibility of appreciating Indian culture without getting entangled in the world of the desi rudeboys. Jas challenges the consumerist patriarchal order with his eventual refusal to side with the desi rudeboys and abide by their hyper-masculine gender performance and conspicuous consumerism. Similarly, Dhilan challenges the hegemonic order by rejecting identification with his father, who complies with that order in his selfishness and passivity. Dhilan frees himself from his Oedipal fixations by disconnecting from cyberspace where algorithms promote self-absorption. Only after that disconnection, is he able to face the reality of his mother's illness and her mortality, prioritizing genuine human connection over the virtual, immortal and body-less image of his mother he had created online. In the final analysis, the novels illuminate the transformation of youth cultures, which originally served as subversive forces challenging societal norms, but have since become influenced and diluted by mediatization and the pervasive individualism of the twenty-first century. Malkani's writing reveals that the greatest contemporary challenge for young people is to move beyond cultural formations imposed upon them by a media-driven, consumerist society.

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