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WHO IS "US" AND WHO IS "THEM" IN HOUNSLOW?
GAUTAM MALKANI'S ANSWERS

SUMMARY

Who is "Us" and who is "Them" in Hounslow? Gautam Malkani's answers

The aim of the author is to recommend Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani* as authentic material for classroom use to teach British culture and raise students' awareness of stereotypes and cultural difference. The article presents an analysis of the novel, focusing on the question of 'othering' and the way South Asian (*desi*) identity is built and developed through membership of a street gang. Attention is also paid to the use of argot as a means of identification. Although the novel was published after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA, it does not concern Muslim assertiveness. The "us"/"them" distinction that permeates the narration arises from generational conflict and cultural difference between the protagonists and the external world, rather than religious conflict. Various stereotypes employed in the novel function as signposts in the complex world of multicultural London not a way of stigmatizing.

Key words: target culture, cultural awareness, EFL classroom, authentic materials, novel, South Asian, stereotype, Malkani, identity, Hounslow.

STRESZCZENIE

Kim są „Oni" i „My" w londyńskim Hounslow? – odpowiedzi Gautama Malkaniego

Autorka artykułu przedstawia analizę powieści brytyjskiego pisarza Gautama Malkaniego zatytułowanej „Londonistan" (tytuł angielskiego oryginału *Londonstani*), rekomendując jej wykorzystanie do nauczania kultury brytyjskiej i podniesienia świadomości międzykulturowej

studentów języka obcego. Koncentrując się na kwestiach stereotypów, tożsamości oraz budowania poczucia własnej wartości poprzez przynależność do gangu, powieść porusza aktualne problemy współczesnej Wielkiej Brytanii. Podział na grupy „my" i „oni", który w znacznym stopniu buduje narrację, wynika zarówno z różnic kulturowych istniejących między bohaterami powieści i światem zewnętrznym, jak też różnic pokoleniowych. Wykorzystane w powieści stereotypy funkcjonują jako znaki rozpoznawcze a nie sposób napiętnowania czy budowania barier. Opublikowana w 2006 roku debiutancka powieść Malkaniego odmalowuje środowisko wielokulturowej metropolii bez uwypuklania kwestii zagrożenia terroryzmem ze strony radykalnych ugrupowań muzułmańskich. Z powodzeniem może zostać wykorzystana jako wartościowe źródło wiedzy o problemach współczesnej młodzieży oraz zainicjowania dyskusji na temat tożsamości indywidualnej i grupowej.

Introduction

The vital need to include a cultural component in foreign language classes has been well documented since the decade of the 1980s. Such scholars as Michael Byram[1] and Claire Kramsch[2] have effectively proved the necessity of teaching target culture in an EFL classroom. Full attention has also been given to the issues of integrating literature into programmes of teacher education, as well as using narrative texts as teaching materials. Valdes asserts: "The statement that literature may be used to teach culture is probably so widely accepted as to be almost a cliché. ... Certainly literature is culture in action, but it is much more than that, and to ignore the wealth of benefits to be accrued from its study in order to concentrate on one aspect only, no matter how valuable, is to deprive the students"[3]. The aim of the present article is to point to "the wealth of benefits" offered by the study of a contemporary novel written by a British-Indian author and to argue for a possibility of its successful use as a teaching material to students of English. Malkani's *Londonstani* deals with the problems faced by many young people – their search for identity, generational conflict, the speed of life in a busy metropolis and an attempt to escape labeling in a multicultural society. Explored as an authentic text in the teaching environment, it may provide knowledge of the contemporary UK's subcultural scene, illustrate an ingenious use of language as a living English speech, and offer food for thought on the questions of assimilation and integration. It can also create a very entertaining and attractive socio-cultural background to issues

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1   M. Byram, *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education*, Clevedon 1989.
2   C. Kramsch, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Oxford 1993.
3   J. M. Valdes, *Culture in literature*, [w:] *Culture Bound*, J. M. Valdes (red.), Cambridge 1998, s. 137.

of cultural difference, urban street behaviour and teenage bonding mechanisms. Most important of all, it may raise students' cultural awareness. *Londonstani* lends itself easily to a discussion on stereotyping, inviting reflection. It appeals to young people's sense of group solidarity and their belief in the power of youth.

On stereotypes

There is nothing new or unusual in constructing collective identity on the basis of perceived difference. The us/them dichotomy is as old as the hills. We can only understand who we are when we realize who we are not, in terms of gender, race, class, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality. The human propensity to draw boundaries and stick labels has often been linked to one of the most basic needs to impose order on the world and search for ways of grouping through similarity and commonwealth, shared history, language, faith, and a sense of belonging. Although scholars (e.g. Geert Hofstede) distinguish between collective and individualistic societies and point to a varied degree of fraternization and bonding, and to diverse comprehension of community ties in different countries and regions of the world, forming groups seems to be a universal human behaviour. From an extended family to a diasporic community, from a local neighbourhood to a social class, from a subculture to a pressure group – individuals come together and integrate to realize plans, express needs and aspirations, and demand recognition. Their actions propelled by a wish for self-actualization, or search for power, they channel activities to achieve a common goal. A feeling of marginalization or shared injustice often lies at the root of a collective appeal to the commonality of cultural experience. Thus the us/them binary division depends on the accentuation of difference and the playing down of what may be similar or shared by the two respective groups. Rather than finding the unifying factors (e.g. in a common a sense of Britishness), what comes to the fore is the divisive dimension (e.g. Celts versus Anglo-Saxons, Christians versus Muslims, whites versus blacks). Prioritizing the difference, often with a certain political agenda behind, to gain support, to acquire leadership, often goes hand in hand with a heightened awareness and concern for identity, the celebration of a group's uniqueness and solidarity. Consequently, placing excessive emphasis on the difference often results in the practice of naming enemies and undue reliance on stereotypes.

Sociologists define stereotypes as "rigid, oversimplified, often exaggerated belief[s]" which are applied "both to an entire social category of people and to each individual within it"[4]. The origins of the term lie in the world of printing. As

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4   A. Johnson, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford 2000, s. 312.

Haslam[5] asserts, the word "stereotype" was first applied to a "cast iron plate used to make repeated impressions of the same image". Characteristically, such impressions were fixed and enduring, *stereos* meaning "solid" in Greek, from which it is borrowed. The first scholar who wrote about stereotypes as mental rather than visual images was the American journalist and sociologist Walter Lippmann. In the book *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, Lippmann discussed widespread beliefs and shared representations of social groups as "pictures in the head"[6], noting that they were not only resistant to change, but also biased, oversimplified and negative. Almost a full century has passed since Lippmann's publication and these years were marked by extensive social and psychological research into the nature of labelling and stereotyping. Issues of cultural identity have steadily made their way into scholarly and public debates raising important points about the nature of "othering" and stigmatizing. Rapport and Overing enumerate diverse opinions which either decry the practice of stereotyping as a "source of social pathology", and a "root of ... sexism, racism, ... xenophobic aggression"[7], or emphasize its usefulness in creating one's sense of belonging and anchoring oneself. Sociological and psychological findings have demonstrated that stereotypes can be both positive and negative. These that concern in-groups tend to be more affirmative and recognizing differences. Conversely, and naturally so, the ones applied to out-groups often represent them as homogenous, attributing essential identical traits to all members of a given group, and additionally accentuating pejorative qualities. Stereotypes operate through binary concepts, through the "critical difference between 'self' and 'other'"[8], always based on the us/them distinction and emphasizing contrast and dissociation, "typifying the world 'outside' in exaggerated opposition, with others' cultural traits being seen as alien and as butting against one's own"[9]. Multiple artistic creations – books and films alike – heavily rely on stereotypes, employing them as "a form of reference, a linguistic element necessary when using certain 'short cuts' in thinking or generalizations"[10]. Zanussi believes that in a work of art stereotypes function as an element of synthesis, being neither harmful nor bad. Such is the case with Gautam Malkani's novel *Londonstani*, where one can easily detect stereotypes of British Indians and

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5   S. A. Haslam, *Stereotypes*, [w:] *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, third edition, vol. 2, A. Kuper, J. Kuper (red.), New York 2004, s. 1002.

6   Ibidem, s. 1002.

7   N. Rapport, J. Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology. The Key Concepts*, London – New York 2005, s. 344.

8   M. Pickering, *Stereotyping. The Politics of Representation*, Houndmills 2001, s. 174.

9   N. Rapport, J. Overing, *Social and Cultural...*, s. 346.

10 K. Zanussi, *National stereotypes in films*, [w:] *Stereotypes and Nations*, T. Walas (red.), Kraków 1995, s. 210.

of Asian youngsters, as well as stereotypical representations of teenage rebels and subcultural formations.

The author and the book

Published in 2006, *Londonstani* is a debut novel of Gautam Malkani, a British writer of Indian background. Barely twenty-nine years old in the year of the book's publication, Malkani had already earned a reputation as a *Financial Times* journalist/editor of business pages as well as a target of some negative attention directed by another British Indian writer, Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal, whose novel *Tourism* appeared in the same year as *Londonstani*. Born in Hounslow, a graduate of Cambridge University with a degree in Social and Political Studies, Malkani admits that the novel is a spin-off from his scientific research. While examining the subject matter of his dissertation on the Brit-Asian rude boy scene and the young Asians' rejection of integration into mainstream Britain, he happened to over-research the topic and collected so much data that it could not possibly be used in his diploma work. The huge material accumulated in the form of interviews made its way into a book which started as non-fiction, eventually to take the shape of first person narrated account of the life of a group of "desi rude boys", Indian teenagers living in the London borough of Hounslow.

Malkani explains the novel in the following words:

> Basically the book tells the story of a bunch of 19-year-old middle-class mummy's boys trying to be men–which they do by asserting their cut-and-paste ethnic identities; by blending their machismo with consumerism; by trying to talk and act as if their affluent corner of a London suburb is some kind of gritty ghetto; (...) by trying to block out their intelligence; and by grating against typically overbearing mothers who would rather their sons remain boys[11].

Short-listed for the Writer of the Year British Book Award 2007, *Londonstani* has earned both praise and heavy criticism. Reviewers stressed the novel's originality, freshness, humour and fast action, its "believable dialogue" and "vivid imagery"[12], negatively commenting on the book's "serious lack of depth"[13], shallow treatment of women, two-dimensional characters and the unconvincing ending

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[11] G. Malkani, http://www. gautammalkani.com.

[12] A. Dover, *Londonstani by Gautam Malkani*, "International Writers Magazine" 2007, http://www. hackwriters.com/Londonstani.htm [dostęp: 6.06.2009].

[13] S. Saadi, *A taste of gangsta Sikh*, [w:] "Independent on Sunday" 21.04.2006, http://www.independent. co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/londonstani-by-gautam-malkani-474920.html, [dostęp: 15.02.2009].

which amounts to "an embarrassingly sophomoric twist for a denouement"[14]. Accusations of "a shabby, 21st-century, Orientalism" and the author's reinforcement of "the structures of power in the world of information"[15] have also been raised.

The novel's title, *Londonstani*, may suggest a debate about radical Muslims in the UK. After all, the book was published in 2006, five years after the 9/11 tragedy in the US and a year after the suicidal attacks on the London transport system carried out by British-born Islamic fundamentalists. However, it was not the author's intention to make a link with orthodox Islam or extremist groups. The coined word for the title is meant to be celebratory, extolling London's multiculturalism. Malkani writes:

> 'Londonstani' is a self-referential term that basically mean[s] I'm proud to be a Londoner because it's a place where I can be both British and Asian (...). It's like desi slang for the word 'Londoner', it means the same thing (except that 'Londoner' sound[s] Victorian and cockney, whereas 'Londonstani' sound[s] much more relevant in the late 20th Century[16].

The suffix "-stani" suggests that people, not place, should merit the reader's attention, simultaneously pointing to the presence of a foreign element. Like "Pakistani" or "Hindustani", rather than "Londoner" or "Briton", the term connotes Asian influences. In 2007, the book was translated into Polish by Maciej Świerkocki and published by Wydawnictwo WAB under the changed title "Londonistan". The Polish title is misleading. Not only does it indicate a completely different original, namely the 2006 non-fictional book by Melanie Phillips *Londonistan: How Britain Has Created a Terrorist State Within*, but it also presupposes Islamization of the UK's capital. As Stuart Jeffries notes in *The Guardian*, "-istan has become a publisher's tic" and the frequency of its use in all kinds of texts (both fictional and scholarly, satirical and serious) implies that "the -istan bull has gone into overdrive"[17].

Londonstani does not concern terrorism or the radicalization of British society. Set in the Hounslow borough of West London, the book centres around a group of teenage Indians who monopolise the illegal business of dealing in stolen mobiles. While Davinder's gang steals and Deepak Gill's group finds clients, Hardjit's crew is responsible for unblocking and re-programming the telephones. The crew consists of four nineteen-year-olds who have failed their exams and now

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[14] S. Harrison, *Rude Boys in Hounslow*, "New York Times" 23.07.2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/23/books/review/23harrison.html?_r=1 [dostęp: 7.10.2009].

[15] S. Saadi, *A taste of...*

[16] G. Malkani, http://www. gautammalkani.com.

[17] S. Jeffries, *New Yorkistan, Londonistan: how – istan became a new cliché*, "Guardian" 04.06.2007.

need to retake their A-levels to pursue their education. Hardjit, Ravi, Amit and Jas (the narrator) nominally study at Hounslow College of Higher Education, but instead of attending classes, they occupy themselves with body building exercises, staging street fights and frequenting designer clothes shops. Following the advice given to them in good faith by Mr. Ashwood, their history teacher, they contact Sanjay, a Cambridge-graduated former investment banker and financial specialist of Indian origin. With his flashy Porsche and a penthouse in Knightsbridge, with his ostensibly high expenses on alcohol and leisure, Sanjay becomes their mentor figure who will prove much more than a professionally successful British Indian and a glamorous partner. A true shark and a big player in organized crime, he will use the boys unscrupulously and lead them to tragedy. In the final chapters, blackmailed and driven to despair, the narrator will attempt to rob his father's warehouse and then set fire to the building, only to wake up in hospital after being beaten unconscious. The hospital card on his bed will disclose to the readers Jas's true identity: Jason Bartholomew-Clivenden, a white male, and the book's ending will throw a new light on the issue of collective identity and the us/them division so meticulously fabricated in the course of the story, undermining the belief in group solidarity.

Gender, with a strong emphasis on teenage visions of masculinity and macho culture is the novel's main concern. But many other issues, specifically those inherent in diasporic communities and in the precariousness of adolescence, are more than merely signalled. Peer pressure and the crushing demands of the consumer society, parents' expectations and the need to keep the traditions of ancestors, street culture and modern urban tribalism, teenage rebellion and dissent – all these find expression in *Londonstani*. Chief among the raised topics is the narrator's yearning to acquire a new identity and acceptance, his desire to belong, to be like others, even at the cost of denying his roots. This desire becomes manifested through an attempt to define clearly who is "us" and who is "them" in Hounslow, with an obvious corollary of the superiority of "us" over "them", and a deep contempt for "non-us".

"Welcome to the London Borough a Hounslow, car park capital a the world"

As a minority group in the UK, British Indians are the most numerous. Differing in terms of religion (Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians and Jains), language (Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Urdu and others), and the economic status, they are often considered the most successful non-white group, with the British Indian millionaire Lakshmi Mittal perennially occupying one

of the top places on the Forbes' list of the wealthiest people in the world. Their strong social and economic position has been earned through hard work of many generations. When in 1991 John Major celebrated the first anniversary of his premiership, he invited several British Asian millionaires to dinner. Out of a group of about fifteen, only one was not Indian[18]. Modood asserts that British Indians "have for some years had an economic-educational profile which is much closer to that of the white majority than of the other non-white groups"[19]. Historically, two of the key factors determining the social position of Indian immigrants and their descendants, were the circumstances of arrival and the country of origin, with the East African Indians (mostly Gujaratis and Punjabis) being predominantly urban, middle class and professional-commercial, and the settlers from the Subcontinent mostly of peasant-farmer origins. While the latter group established communities in the West Midlands and outer London (especially Southall), East African Indians (a much smaller group) settled in North-West London (e.g. Harrow) and Leicester[20] but, as Baumann notes, many of East African Sikhs chose Southall for settlement, where they established a vibrant community and transformed the local economy. Today, "[t]he proportion of Southallians who identify themselves as Sikhs may amount to something like 40 per cent across the town as a whole and 60 per cent in the central wards"[21]. A quick look at a map of London shows that Harrow borders on Ealing (with Southall as one of its districts), and Ealing borders on Hounslow. Thus the three London boroughs of Harrow, Ealing and Hounslow form a distinctive belt of West London and together create a large space where Asians have been living for decades.

Hounslow, the setting of Malkani's novel, where the Indian resident population exceeds 10%, is sometimes treated as the epitome of Asian success. Considered to be quite prosperous, it differs considerably from other areas of London with substantial non-white communities, the so-called "twilight zones"[22] of poor housing and relatively high unemployment. Being a suburb and a well-to-do area, Hounslow boasts of high rates of home ownership and luxury lifestyle of its residents. *Londonstani*'s protagonists' parents live in spacious, multi-bedroom houses, drive the latest models of expensive automobiles with personalized number plates, pay for their children's private tuition, and give them cars and Swarovski jewellery as birthday presents. The ethnic/religious diversity of Hounslow, as well as the area's affluence and cultural specificity, are depicted in chapter two:

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[18]   T. Modood, *Not Easy Being British: Colour, Culture and Citizenship*, London 1992, s. 44.

[19]   Ibidem, s. 30.

[20]   Ibidem, s. 31.

[21]   G. Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*, Cambridge 2004, s. 73.

[22]   D. Mason, *Race and Ethnicity in Modern Britain*. Second edition, Oxford 2000, s. 80.

Some houses had got Om symbols stuck on the wooden front doors behind glass porches, some a them had Khanda ... an others had the Muslim crescent moon. All a them had satellite TV dishes next to the main bedroom window, stuck up there like framed dentists' diploma certificates. If there weren't no symbol on the front door, you could still tell if it was a desi house if there was more than one satellite dish. One for Zee TV an one for Star Plus, probly. You could tell if someone was home cos the daal an subjhi smell would mix in with the airport traffic on the Great West Road[23].

An important aspect of Hounslow's geographical location is its proximity to Heathrow, hence "the airport traffic" mentioned by Jas. ("They called it Heathrow cos it's bang in the middle a Hounslow Heath or someshit"[24]). In an interview given for *Time Out* Malkani recalls:

For most of us, the airport represented one of two things: a gateway to India conveniently located just down the Great West Road, or the prospect of a shitty job loading other people's luggage on to a rotating conveyor belt. To make the escapism even more oppressive, for some people it was the cheap flights granted to airport employees and their relatives that made possible trips to far-flung corners of the globe such as Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore[25].

Heathrow's presence is mentioned more than once in the novel and may be interpreted metaphorically. On the one hand, the airport offers jobs, and many Indians from Hounslow have found employment there, even if of the most menial type ("But how many a them'll still be here in Hounslow in ten years' time, working in Heathrow fuckin airport helpin goras catch planes to places so they could turn their own skin brown?"[26]). On the other hand, it is a port of entry and departure, its closeness suggesting liminality, a potential of being betwixt and between; betwixt continents, cultures, ethnicities; between Englishness and Indianness, between childhood and adulthood, which is precisely the state and phase of development that *Londonstani*'s protagonists encounter and go through.

Us and Them

Londosntani's protagonists are Hardjit's crew: Jas, Amit, Ravi and Hardjit himself. All are nineteen, all need to retake their examinations, all share interests and idolize the same heroes. Bollywood films and gangster movies, bhangra music, Indian cricket players, the latest technological gadgets and the newest night clubs

23 G. Malkani, *Londonstani,* London 2007, s. 17-18.
24 Ibidem, s. 17.
25 G. Malkani, http://www.timeout.com/ london/ features/ 145.html.
26 G. Malkani, *Londonstani*, s. 23.

in town occupy their minds and time, and fill conversational space. The boys' common collective identity is built through a distinctive lifestyle, their argot, and a sense of belonging to a group and a territory. The territory, as mentioned above, is Hounslow, the group is a subculture of "desi rude boys".

The word "desi" (or "deshi") originates in Hinglish, a variety of English spoken by diasporic South Asians, which is a blend of English, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. In the past, Hinglish was "the lingo of the uneducated masses"[27] while today it is considered quite trendy since it carries "connotations of pride and self-worth"[28]. Desi/deshi is a "generic word for 'countryman'"[29] and may be interpreted to mean "authentically South Asian", referring specifically to the Indian diaspora. Its use emphasizes the fact that a person is rooted in the South Asian community. Its semantic field is rather broad and includes "such terms as Indian, Pakistani, Hindu, Sikh or Muslim"[30]. As Malkani asserts, the word entered the Oxford Dictionary of English first as an adjective in 2003, and then as a noun two years later. In *Londonstani*, "desi" functions both as a noun and adjective. It positively describes authenticity of dress, food, behaviour, custom and looks, simultaneously being a proud term of self-identification. The use of the term is a matter of identity as well as being an act of defiance, an attempt at rejecting various labels invented by white Britons to refer to ethnic minorities. The narrator explains:

> People're always tryin to stick a label on our scene. That's the problem with havin a fuckin scene. 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 the word rudeboy[31].

Historically, rude boys or "Rudies", with alternative ways of spelling as one or two words, were a subculture of Jamaican origin which flourished in the 1960s and was transported to England via West Indian immigration[32]. In teenage circles it was considered attractive because of its glamorized image of archetypal rebels, street-wise youths with their flashy urban style, the "lone delinquent[s] pitched hopelessly against an implacable authority"[33]. Original rude boys "lived for the

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27   A. Gentleman, *The Queen's "Hinglish" gains in India*, "New York Times" 21.11.2007.

28   Y. Hussain, *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*, Aldershot – Burlington 2005, s. 16.

29   J. Lahiri, *The Namesake*, London 2011, s. 118.

30   G. Malkani, *What's right with Asian boys,* "Financial Times" 21.04. 2006, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms [dostęp: 23.03.2013].

31   G. Malkani, *Londonstani*, s. 5.

32   M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture. The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*, London - New York 1995, s. 133; D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London - New York 1998, s. 145.

33   D. Hebdige, *Subculture...*, s. 37.

luminous moment"[34]. Smartly dressed, self-assured, and full of bravado, they were always eager to "test their strength against the law"[35], hence the group's quick appropriation of the term. The novel's protagonists, Hardjit's crew, like the original rude boys forty years earlier, consider themselves eternally in opposition, to the forces of law and order, to school authorities, to parents, to various Others. And like original Rudies, they take pride in their appearance and street fights, in being cool, possessing "that distant and indefinable quality ... almost abstract, almost metaphysical, intimating a stylish kind of stoicism"[36].

The characters' collective identity is based on the inclusion/exclusion and specifically on the understanding of us/them division through identifying enemies: "goras" (white people, non-desis); "ponces and lesbians" (homosexuals); and "coconuts", people who are brown on the outside and white inside, i.e. Asians who have adopted the English ways and speak with "poncey Amgrez accent"[37], sometimes also referred to as "Bounty bars, Oreo biscuits or any other fuckin food that was white on the inside"[38]. The gang manifests equal contempt for all enemies, whom they easily identify by their looks, accent, cars, music and sartorial choices. Jas comments on a man in a silver Peugeot 305 which stops at the red traffic light. "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. So white he was inside his brown skin, he probably talked like those gorafied desis who read the news on TV"[39].

Common collective identity, based on a feeling of belonging to a group and a clear definition of insiders/outsiders empowers the characters to pronounce their rights and specify claims, among them their sole right to deliberately and perversely use the offensive term "Paki" in a nominal way. The very first sentence of the novel – "Serve him right he got his muthafucking face fuck'd, shud't b callin me a Paki, innit"[40] – both sets the scene and emphasizes the importance of language, and especially the terms of identification. A young white boy is violently kicked in the face by Hardjit, the group's self-appointed leader, for an offence he did not commit. As Hardjit continues the attack, he adds: "Shudn't b callin us Pakis, innit, u dirrty gora ... Call me or any a ma bredrens a Paki again an I'ma

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34 D. Hebdige, *Reggae, Rastas and Rudies*, [w:] *Resistance through Rituals. Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, S. Hall, T. Jefferson (red.), London – New York 2002, s. 145.

35 Ibidem, s. 145.

36 Ibidem, s. 145.

37 G. Malkani, *Londonstani*, s. 21.

38 Ibidem, s. 23.

39 Ibidem, s. 21.

40 Ibidem, s. 3.

mash u an yo family. In't dat da truth, Pakis?"[41], the last phrase being addressed
to the crew – Ravi, Amit and Jas – who are passively watching the spectacle. For
it is a spectacle calculated for effect. While continuing the assault Hardjit makes
sure that his designer clothes and trainers do not get soiled and that the white boy
gets a good look at his gold chain. As he explains later, the term "Paki" can only be
used by "Pakis themselves", who are not necessarily of Pakistani origin but must
be British South Asians.

> It ain't necessary for u 2 b a Pakistani to call a Pakistani a Paki ... or for u 2 call any Paki
> a Paki for dat matter. But u gots 2 be call'd a Paki yourself. U gots 2 b, like, an honorary Paki
> or someshit. An dat's da rule. Can't be callin someone a Paki less u also call'd a Paki, innit ....
> A Paki is someone who comes from Pakistan. Us bredrens who don't come from Pakistan can
> still b call'd Paki by other bredrens if it means we can call dem Paki in return. But u people
> ain't allow'd 2 join in, u get me?[42]

The common brotherhood as reflected in the novel's initial chapters is that
of colour, with the exception of "coconuts". This is humorously emphasized in
the following passage: "We don't go red when we been shamed an we don't go
blue when we dead .... We don't even go purple when we be bruised, jus a darker
brown. An still goras got da front to call *us* coloured"[43]. Collective "we" stands for
desis, collective "they" refers to whites. However, as the hospital scene will reveal
much later, the perceived difference of us/them and the attempt to construct bar-
riers between in- and out-groups may be a matter of wishful thinking. The boys'
South Asian identity is situational – shared with the teenagers of Pakistani origin
when the situation demands (as for example when they see themselves as non-
whites) and exclusive on religious grounds when South Asian Muslims are seen
as enemies of Hindus and Sikhs. The young narrator still remembers the events of
the previous decade when the local gangs waged serious turf wars. He recalls the
time when "all the Muslim kids acted as if they were members of the Wild Apaches
or the Chalvey Boys a Slough an all the Sikh kids acted as if they were members
a Shere Punjab, which, depending on who you talk to, means either 'Tigers a the
Punjab' or 'Lions a the Punjab'"[44].

The protagonists' common collective identity built through inclusion/ex-
clusion becomes also manifested through the use of a peculiar argot based on
the following elements: profuse swearing, heavy intrusion of numerous phrases
from the languages of the Subcontinent (e.g. "satsang", "pehndu", "shaadi", "rakhi",

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41 Ibidem.
42 Ibidem, s. 6-7.
43 Ibidem, s. 3.
44 Ibidem, s. 84.

"oolti", "bhajans", "chai"), the use of text messages with a frequent substitution of digits for words (e.g. "4 da past 2 years"), as well as great care taken, specifically in the case of the narrator, to avoid any vocabulary items that might suggest some sophistication. The smooth fusion of Jamaican swear words (e.g. "ras clat"), Hollywood movies slang (e.g. the "Feds" for the "police", "bucks" for "money"), black rappers' lexis (e.g. "wikid" and "safe" for "very good") and the corrupted English words (e.g. "dissing" in the sense of "showing disrespect", as in "U dissin ma mum?" or "front" for "affront") builds a platform for a subcultural bond and reflects London's (and Hounslow's) multiculturalism. The protagonists' language as well as being an identifying factor and a mark of belonging, successfully renders the atmosphere of exclusivity. It is the boys' own, inimitable way of communicating, sealing them off from the world of adults and outsiders. But through its blend of diverse elements and the copious borrowing from various distinct sources the argot also bespeaks of peaceful coexistence of disparate cultures. In the context of the novel, it acts as anti-language.

Montgomery asserts that anti-languages "tend to arise among subcultures and groups that occupy a marginal or precarious position in society"[45]. The desi rude boys of Hounslow, although insignificant in numbers, create a peculiar mini subculture. Hardjit's crew actively searches for its own minority style and thus answers to the description of a youth subculture. Sociologists (e.g. Jefferson and Hall 1992; Brake 1980, Hebdige 1998) stress that subcultures usually originate as a sign of rebellion and dissent, often reflecting young people's refusal to conform. They attempt to differentiate themselves from non-members through their distinctive manner and image. Characterized by non-domestic forms of belonging and associated with particular territory, subcultures belong to the city. *Londonstani*'s desi rudeboys identify with Hounslow and look for self-actualization outside their families. Furthermore, their argot exemplifies the use of the restricted code to express solidarity. The boys' language reveals ethnic and generational boundaries and at the same time signals resistance against authority and the dominant culture, acting as a singular weapon with which to fight for self-definition and individuality.

The language clearly marks the group as unique, also as substantially different from the boys' parents. Thus, the us/them differentiation becomes also a matter of the generation gap. The protagonists' mums and dads belong to the first generation of Indian immigrants, while the boys themselves were born in England. This is reflected not only in the parents' strong attachment to various

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45   M. Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society. Second Edition*, London – New York 1995, s. 96.

customs and traditions brought from the Subcontinent but also in their use of English. Unlike their children, the parents speak with a strong foreign accent. Phonetic peculiarities, like v/w merger, are rendered in spelling, as in, for example: "Vot is matter?"[46] or "Vot vill people think?"[47].

The boys' "cut-and-paste ethnicity" (to use Malkani's description) is a strange mixture of Indianness and an urban lifestyle in which idols and heroes come both from Bollywood pictures and American gangster movies. Hardjit, who comes from a Sikh family, has a Khanda symbol tattooed on his right biceps, the word "desi" embroidered on his jacket and always wears a Karha (Sikh steel bangle) and something orange. Jas notes: "Hardjit always wore a Karha round his wrist an something orange to show he was a Sikh"[48]. Yet, Hardjit's Sikhism, like his Indianness, seems just a proxy. In the opinion of his parents, Hardjit abuses his religion and does not embrace the creed. Superficially, and stereotypically so, *Londonstani* protagonists put premium on "desiness": they listen to South Asian music, enjoy Indian food, participate in family meetings and show respect for custom and tradition. They value *izzat*, honour, also defined as "the male pride of one's brothers and father"[49] and *artha* (the Hindu duty to do well for yourself materially), observe Diwali, and tie *rakhi* ribbons for brotherly love. Posters which decorate their bedroom walls present Indian actors and cricket players. However, they reflect the occupiers' concern with images of tough guys and masculinity much more than with the culture of their ancestors.

The group's selective identity is also manifested through street gang routine and adherence to a few rudeboy rules of behaviour, to a few maxims that constitute a particular code of conduct and exemplify the boys' deep fascination with glamorous lifestyles and a teenage rebellion. Successful relationships with "the ladies" (aka "fit girls"); conspicuous consumption and avoiding trouble with the police become ultimate goals. Parental authority takes second place to peer pressure and consumerism. Hardjit's crew subscribe to the theory of a 'Bling-Bling economics': "This isn't about society becoming more affluent, this is about a subculture that worships affluence becoming mainstream culture"[50]. The boys may wish to manifest their exclusive desi rude boy identity, but to a large extent it is a form of playacting.

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[46] G. Malkani, *Londonstani,* s. 260.
[47] Ibidem, s. 262.
[48] Ibidem, s. 9.
[49] M. Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Subcultures. Sex and Drugs and Rock'n'Roll*, London – Boston – Henley 1980, s. 132.
[50] G. Malkani, *Londonstani*, s. 171.

The twist at the end of the novel, which reveals that Jas the narrator is in fact Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden, a white teenager involved in the activities of an Indian gang, comes unexpected. When in chapter two Jas declares: "I had one a them extra long surnames that nobody'd ever pronounce properly"[51], the reader believes that Jas's surname is one of so many difficult Indian names to be encountered among South Asian diaspora. Never for a moment is Jason's desiness/Indianness questioned until the final pages. Constant efforts taken by the narrator during the course of the story to be and sound like his friends, to belong fully to the crew, to speak and behave in a similar way, serve one purpose – to acquire a new identity that would give him pride and self-respect. His attempts to adopt the lifestyle and culture of his Indian peers, and to construct a new self, have been based on a rejection of the culture of his white parents, the parents who support and try to understand–the mother wearing Pashmina shawls and cooking Indian food, e.g. "chicken biryani with extra chillies"[52]; the father deciding to lie to the police so that his son does not get a criminal record. And in the end it is Jason's parents, not the members of the crew, who stand by him, and it is his father, not the Bollywood actors or Indian cricket players, who becomes a true hero by firmly resisting the pressure and declining the "offer" made by the criminal world.

The narrator has learned a hard lesson about his "youngster's version of Indian culture"[53]. His father's words bring the truth home to him: "You're not like them .... And we both tried. Your mother and I. We tried for your sake to be friends with them, to be like them, to get to know them. ... We tried. You're not like them, son"[54]. Thus, the us/them division falls into an old paradigm of ethnic difference, with the narrator's fake desiness fully exposed. Jason's wish to belong through appropriation symbolizes in equal measure his naïve teenage rebellion and living in his own secluded world of false aspirations. The book's ending suggests that the young characters' ethnic identity, both situational and performative, has always been a mirage. On his official website Malkani explains the reason for the twist in the novel in the following way:

> [T]he reason for the twist is simple enough: it seemed the most effective way of making the point that this stuff's not about race or ethnicity, but about how those identities are used like tools to be more of a man (...) [Y]our ethnic identity can often be something you *choose* to express or not–like other aspects of your identity, you can switch it on or off depending on the context (...). Our identities are therefore a performance (...). The point of the twist (...) is to show the extent to which this can even be a fictionalised performance[55].

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51   Ibidem, s. 24.
52   Ibidem, s. 33.
53   Ibidem, p. 340.
54   Ibidem.
55   G. Malkani, http://www. gautammalkani.comabout_londonstani. htm.

Response to 9/11?

Technically, by virtue of the year of its publication, *Londonstani* is a post-9/11 novel. But its presented world is completely devoid of any references to war on terror, Muslim fundamentalism or Islamophobia. Nor can we find among the characters any bearded men entering London underground trains with bombs in their rucksacks. Yet, Islam is a real presence in the book. It features in the recognition of territorial rights, in familial norms and restrictions passed on to the young generation and in the notion of *izzat*. As understood and accepted by the young protagonists, Southall is a Sikh domain while Slough belongs to Muslims. Conversely, Hounslow is "more a mix of Sikhs, Muslim and Hindus"[56]. This mix accounts for a necessity to share space and for constant cross-religious contacts. The same school and communal activities result in daily encounters of nominal enemies and in their understanding that although Diwali, Eid and Guru Nanak's birthday are holidays confined to specific denominational groups, they form a part of one calendar. Old animosities prevail though, and inter-Asian conflict often results in violence. However, unlike in the past, when west London witnessed some of the most brutal anti-Indian racist attacks perpetrated by the white soldiers of the National Front, clashes that take place in Malkani's novel concern mostly, although not exclusively, the ethnic population. They are "the brown-on-brown" and "one-on-one" battles[57], as exemplified by a fight between Hardjit and Tariq. To emphasize his Sikhism Hardjit appears with a Karha and an orange bandanna, while Tariq wears the colours of a Pakistani cricket team. Such confrontations are mere spectacles. Planned as occasions to display physical strength and prowess, they end in a complete shambles, with the fighters more resembling "gangsta penguins"[58] than tough guys. Overtly manifested faith is skin-deep. When a real tragedy occurs, its reason is not religious conflict. Arun's suicidal death follows disagreements about a Hindu marrying another Hindu.

Londonstani's world does not resemble tendentious misrepresentations of Islam, so often fed to the public by the media, such hostile images which Edward Said classifies as the circulation of "reductive material"[59]. Nor does the novel attempt to enter the post 9/11 debate. Its silence on terrorism and fundamentalism may seem striking to some readers. Yet, we should not interpret this as any kind of evasion or weakness. It would be wrong to treat the book as a humorous story about a bunch of adolescents cocooned in their small world of petty prob-

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56   G. Malkani, *Londonstani*, s. 12.
57   Ibidem, s. 12.
58   Ibidem, s. 99.
59   E. Said (ed. and with an introduction by G. Viswanathan), *Power, Politics and Culture. Interviews with Edward W. Said*, London 2005, s. 296.

lems, of which they are bound to grow out very soon. The precariousness of their teen years and the formative period of their adolescence expose them to wrong influences which may harm for life. The adopted stance of not caring about large issues or causes, which stems from the boys' fascination with the flashy lifestyle of celebrity culture, may seriously damage their future chances of success. The pressures of living in a society obsessed with status and performance can lead to further alienation. But why should the reader expect any allusions to 9/11? From the outset, the novel was promoted as a story reflecting on the intersection of consumerism and machismo, not a voice in the discussion on the clash of civilizations. The reviews that appeared in the British media, although openly pointing to numerous weaknesses in Malkani's prose, did not refer to the novel's silence on 9/11. The tragedy of 9/11 is a non-issue in *Londonstani*. It being a non-issue in Malkani's work is a non-issue for literary critics, notably so for the fellow British Asian writers like Kamila Shamsi and Suhayl Saadi. Readers who expect that a post-9/11 novel, authored by somebody with an Asian name, will deal with terrorism, fall into a trap of stereotyping "as a signifying practice"[60].

In 2006-2007, some media attention was paid to well-known rivalry between Malkani and Dhaliwal, another British writer of Indian descent, whose novel *Tourism* was published in the same year as *Londonstani*. Both books are set in contemporary London, both deal with South Asian characters and the culture of conspicuous consumption. In *Tourism*, just as in *Londonstani*, the protagonists hop easily between the world of masala tea, samosas and tandoori chicken, and that of Gucci sunglasses, Louis Vitton bags and diamond necklaces. With its plot developments following the events of 2002-2004, *Tourism* is equally silent on 9/11, with one exception. A scene is included in which a white girl is surprised to learn that Sikhs wear turbans and grow beards and thus she reacts: "'So that man's a Sikh? I thought he was a Muslim. ... The one who flew that plane into that building. You know, Osama Bin Laden'"[61]. By and large, white Britons do not possess profound knowledge of their Asian bredren. Sociologists and Indian journalists alike (e.g. Ballard and Banks 1994; Bhachu 1985; Alibhai-Brown 2000) assert that the heterogeneity and variety within "the self-created worlds of Britain's South Asian settlers"[62] go largely unnoticed and their communities – deeply divided by class, faith and ethnicity and yet indistinguishable to many – are often lumped together. Assumptions that if a book is published after 2001 and written by a British writer of South Asian descent, then it probably relates to Muslim fundamentalism,

[60] S. Hall, *The Spectacle of 'Other'*, [w:] *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, S. Hall (red.), London – Thousand Oaks – New Delhi 2002, s. 257.
[61] N. Singh Dhaliwal, *Tourism*, London 2006, s. 129.
[62] R. Ballard, *Introduction*, [w:] *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain*, R. Ballard, M. Banks (red.), London 1994, s. 29.

may be regarded as lack of discriminatory judgement. Readers who want to peruse revelations on how the UK has become a haven for Muslim terrorism may turn to *Londonistan*, a book by a white Briton, Melanie Philips. As stated above, this non-fictional account should not be mistaken for Malkani's novel. Regrettably, the Polish publisher of Malkani's book did not seem to care.

As mentioned earlier, *Londonstani* grew out of the author's student interest and took shape during his "exploration of how the assertion of ethnic identities is sometimes better viewed as a proxy for the assertion of masculinity"[63], the topic pursued during his stay at Cambridge at the end of the 1990s. The interviews with young Asians of Hounslow that were recorded for the purpose of Malkani's socio- logical research continued after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre. In an article written for the *Financial Times* the author recalls some genuine surprise expressed by his colleague on learning that after 9/11 one interviewee spoke about Muslim boys converting Sikh girls to Islam. Reporting for the *Financial Times*, the author did investigate the topic of Islamic fundamentalism and it seems that the decision to leave it out of his novel was deliberate. Zaltzman[64] writes that before the publication Malkani received an advance of 300,000 pounds, a very high sum for a first novel, which proves that a green light was given to a story that would speak about multicultural London in a new way.

Conclusion

Trying to answer the question of who is "us" and who is "them" in Malkani's Hounslow, one may claim that the book's ending challenges any attempt at a simple, straightforward answer. Superficially, "us" stands for the protagonists – the four teenagers who define themselves as desi rude boys of Hounslow and try to carve their unique identity in opposition to "them" – non-desis, parents and authorities, as well as anybody old-fashioned or foolish enough to believe in the values of good education, hard work and human integrity. And yet each boundary, each line of separation proves illusory. Jas/Jason, for all his earnest effort to become like his school friends, is a white boy, a non-desi. His teenage rebellion against the norms and values of the adult world and the culture of his parents ends in failure. *Londonstani*'s final chapter undermines the notion of a stable identity. Likewise, it calls into question the practice of erecting barriers, even if only symbolic or short- -lived, between in- and out-groups. The situational, cut-and-paste identity of the protagonists exists as a sheer fantasy, the fantasy indulged in by a few boys wishing

63   G. Malkani, *What's right with Asian boys*, "Financial Times" 21.04.2006.
64   H. Zaltzman, *Body of evidence*, "Guardian" 15.04.2007.

to be men. The process of identity construction through "othering" and through appropriation proves to be a form of playacting, an instance of going through a liminal stage, an unavoidable accompaniment to growing up.

If one of the functions of subcultural formations is facilitating young people's gradual assimilation into adult society and providing them with social tools to cope with the marginal status of adolescence, then *Londonstani* may be read as a study of typical subcultural behaviour. Hardjit's group manifests its "autonomy from wider social and economic relations, and a sense of like-mindedness with others of the same group"[65], which is a principal characteristic of subcultures. The desi rude boys of Hounslow try to create a "symbolic context for the develop-ment and reinforcement of collective identity and individual self-esteem"[66], as all subcultures do. Historically, subcultures, throughout decades of their existence, have always attempted to provide an alternative place to home, work, or school. They have offered a platform to develop relationships, creating an arena where to build or discover dignity and self-respect, where to gain a sense of self-fulfilment, because most other options were non-existent or non-available. The desi rude boys of Hounslow purposefully reject some other options recommended by parents or school because only group membership of their own making creates a bond which they crave.

Clarke *et al.* argue that for a group to become a group, rather than a mere collection of individuals, they have to organize their collectivity around shared focal concerns and rituals. They need to develop "specific rhythms of interchange, structured relations between members"[67], which will underpin their collective identity. Hardjit's crew's delinquency and foul language, their sense of territory, male solidarity and tough machismo are so typical of subcultural behaviour that they may be treated as clichés. If stereotypes rely on overgeneralizations and function as a kind of shorthand, then Malkani's novel abounds in stereotypical representations – and not only of subcultural style. It makes use of stereotypes of various kinds: of British Indians with their food and family traditions, of school drop-outs contemptuous of education and parents' aspirations, of British Asian youth who "inhabit a very different world at school from that of home"[68] and, because of that, either withdraw into their own culture or "suffer from genera-

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65   D. Hesmondhalgh, *Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above*, "Journal of Youth Studies" 2005, nr 8,1, s. 21-40.

66   J. Clarke, S. Hall, T. Jefferson, B. Roberts, *Subcultures, cultures and class. A theoretical overview*, [w:] *Resistance Through Rituals. Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, S. Hall, T. Jefferson (red.), London 2002, s. 29.

67   Ibidem, s. 47.

68   M. Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture. The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*, London – New York 1995, s. 139.

tional conflict"[69], of London's YUPPIES with their expensive leisure pursuits, and of teenage rebels who bond together and search for identity. However, much more than a "source of consistent, expectable, broad and immediate ways of knowing"[70], the novel's stereotypes become a kind of "cognitive anchor"[71] to help the reader, functioning as signposts in the complex world of multicultural London.

If analysed and discussed in a foreign language classroom, *Londonstani* invites reflection on the nature of sticking labels and 'othering'. It shows a double nature of stereotypes, both as "a crude set of mental representations of the world"[72] and as "our way of dealing with the instabilities of our perception of the world"[73]. The former type often arises when we feel threatened or try to deal with the unknown. Such is often the case with our visions of cultural and religious difference (e.g. the world of London's ethnic minorities, Muslim fundamentalism). The latter category proves helpful in understanding the difference and "deal[ing] with people as individuals"[74].

Using the novel *Londonstani* as an authentic teaching material to teach both English as a foreign language and British culture may help to move language teaching towards intercultural learning as well as enhancing cross-cultural understanding of difference. The fact that "literature has rich potential for learning processes geared to cultural understanding"[75] is beyond dispute. This rich potential can only be fully explored if the texts selected for classroom use are well suited to students interests and language needs. Malkani's novel fulfils the criteria of good selection.

As I have argued elsewhere[76], authentic materials prove invaluable in teaching a target culture, but they must be used wisely, not merely exploited for language needs. Only then can foreign language classrooms "further an understanding of foreign culture and give students an insight into it"[77].

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69 Ibidem.

70 N. Rapport, J. Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology. The Key Concepts*, London – New York 2005, s. 347.

71 Ibidem, s. 346.

72 S. Gilman, *The deep structure of stereotypes*, [w:] *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, S. Hall (red.), London - Thousand Oaks - New Delhi 2002, s. 284.

73 Ibidem.

74 Ibidem, s. 285.

75 M. Schewe, *Culture through literature through drama*, [w:] *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective*, M. Byram, M. Fleming (red.), Cambridge 1998, s. 204.

76 A. Tomczak, *The Seven Commandments for Teaching British Studies*, [w:] *Cultural Curriculum: Theory, Practice, Trends*, J. Rydlewska (red.), Szczecin 2002.

77 M. Schewe, *Culture through...*, s. 206.

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