

Passing(s) in Gautam Malkani's Londonstani

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Passing(s) in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*

Travail de fin d'études présenté par PONCELET Alice
en vue de l'obtention du grade de
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1. Introduction

Do you know who you are?

— Harry Styles, “Lights Up”

The nature of identity is an ancient question to which there seems to be no easy answer. Societies provide us with terms and labels to determine and shape our identity, and we use them to understand both other people and ourselves. These categories are based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, and many other aspects of identity. Even though these identity categories offer valuable and useful frameworks and models to navigate identity, they are challenged by the diverse and multicultural nature of our societies. This is especially true today because of the rapid changes occurring in the world through the influence of migration, the media, and the internet. Our identities seem to be more varied and more complex than ever before, as they are determined by social and cultural factors that are in constant flux. Therefore, it is not an easy task to understand and know oneself, a matter which concerns us all.

Nowadays, the concept of identity is at the centre of debates and disagreements, especially regarding its boundaries and limits. There seem to be two aspects to this issue: whether we can choose our identity, and whether others have to respect and accept it. This issue is often discussed in the media and in the public discourse. Over the last years, an increasing number of headlines and articles have appeared about problematic representations of identity. For instance, in 2018, British actor and director Anthony Ekundayo Lennon was accused of faking being mixed race (Hattenstone). The accusation came after the announcement that Lennon was accepted on to the artistic director

leadership programme for people in the black, Asian and minority ethnic community theatre practitioners (Hattenstone). People took offence that a white man received funding meant for people of colour. Lennon defended himself by saying that, despite having white parents, he had always been treated by people as mixed raced because of his skin colour, and identified as a person of mixed heritage (Hattenstone). The fact that Lennon could be seen as mixed race was described as a case of “passing,” which is the ability of a person to be regarded as a member of an identity group or category that is different from their own.

This dissertation looks at the issue of passing in Gautam Malkani’s 2006 novel *Londonstani*. The novel revolves around the story of Jas, the main character and narrator, and describes his life with the self-proclaimed “desi rudeboys,” a group British Asian teenagers living in the Hounslow borough of West London in the early two thousands. A central element of the story is the performative aspect of their identities, with Jas and the rudeboys pretending to be someone else than who they truly are.

Gautam Malkani was born in London in 1976. His mother was a Ugandan of Indian origin. He grew up and went to school in Hounslow in London. He studied Social and Political Sciences at Christ’s College at the University of Cambridge. After his graduation, he became a writer for the *Financial Times*, where he worked for several years. He also edited the *Financial Times*’ Creative Business media and marketing supplement. Malkani has also written for the *New York Times*, *Prospect Magazine*, and *Time Out*. He also worked in the Washington bureau, and has written on the media industry. *Londonstani*, published in 2006, was his first novel. It started out as part of his research for his undergraduate thesis on British Asian identity. He focused on the rudeboy scene, and tried to understand why young British Asians rejected integration into mainstream society. Malkani over-researched the topic and decided to use the material he had collected to write

a book. Malkani also wrote another novel published in 2018, *Distortion*, about the influence of the digital world on reality. He now works as a commissioning editor for the *Guardian Labs*.

Londonstani was one of the most highly anticipated British debut novels of the early twenty-first century. Before its publication, the presentation of the book at the 2005 Frankfurt Book Fair had caused quite a stir in the literary world (Flood; Sethi). It was the subject of a fierce bidding war, with apparently at least five publishing houses fighting over it, *Fourth Estate* eventually coming through (Sethi). It was later revealed that the publishing company offered a six-figure advance to secure the rights to the book, which was identified as being around £380,000 (Flood). Expectations ran high for the novel and *Fourth Estate* clearly hoped that *Londonstani* would receive a lot of attention and achieve high sales levels, similarly to other successful twenty-first-century British debuts, such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003). Malkani was compared to Smith and Ali because, like them, he was young, Oxbridge-educated, and because his novel, like theirs, provided an insight into the lives of an ethnic minority community in twenty-first-century multicultural London. The fact that the subject of the novel, London's British Asian "rudeboy" scene, was fairly new in literary fiction helped to generate excitement for the book. A massive promotion campaign ensued, including a tour of the United States, where the novel was handled by Smith's editor Ann Godoff (Sethi). Yet, despite the hype, the book achieved disappointing sales with only 15,000 copies sold in its first two years (Flood). *Londonstani*'s high advance and poor sales results has even been dubbed the "Londonstani effect" by some insiders of the publishing industry (Flood). Regardless of this, *Londonstani* was shortlisted for the "Writer of the Year British Book Award" in 2007, and later for the "Crossword Book Award" in 2013.

Even though the novel was written more than fifteen years ago, some of the themes discussed in the text are still highly relevant today, more specifically, themes relating to identity such as passing and authenticity. Although a considerable number of studies have already been written on identity in Malkani's novel, it has been some time since any new contribution has been added to the list of publications about the novel, especially regarding passing. As such, the purpose of my dissertation is not to radically call into question the conclusions that have already been drawn in previous analyses of the book, but rather to provide an updated and hopefully enriched view of passing in *Londonstani*, using additional sources and recent critical perspectives.

After giving a short summary of the story and a theoretical background on passing, I will focus on the characters in the novel whose identities are primarily performative, and examine the dynamics and significance of their behaviours in terms of passing. In addition, I will also look at the role and position of the author, which I identify as a manifestation of passing, expanding the discussion beyond the scope of this dissertation to the use and application of passing in narration in a more general sense.

2. Plot of the Story

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.

— Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani*

The novel tells the story of Jas, a nineteen-year-old boy from Hounslow in London. Together with Ravi and Amit, he is part of a group of self-proclaimed “desi rudeboys” led by Hardjit. The story starts with Hardjit beating up a boy, named Daniel, who Hardjit believes called the rudeboys “Pakis”. Ravi, Amit and Jas watch and encourage Hardjit. Despite the fact that Daniel was Jas’s friend and that Daniel never used the word “Paki,” Jas does not try to stop the beating.

The story then shows the rudeboys in their daily lives. Instead of going to school, the rudeboys spend most of their time roaming the streets, engaging in fights and committing petty crimes. The rudeboys make money by illegally reprogramming and unblocking stolen mobile phones. They sometimes do it as a favour to help their family and friends who want to swap mobile phones with each other, but they mostly do it so that the stolen mobiles phones can be resold.

The rudeboys prepare for a fight between Hardjit and another boy called Tariq. The rudeboys get in trouble with the police but are helped by a former school teacher, Mr Ashwood. He is worried about the future of the rudeboys. Mr Ashwood wants to help them and puts them in contact with one of his former students, Sanjay Varma. Sanjay was a good student in his class and he studied Economics at Cambridge. He has become a

successful investment banker in the City of London. Mr Ashwood hopes that Sanjay will be a good influence on the rudeboys, and that introducing a positive role model into their lives will put them back on the right track.

It turns out that Sanjay is not the role model that Mr Ashwood believes him to be, but is actually a white-collar criminal. He got tired of the financial world and decided to use his talents and intelligence to run a large-scale tax fraud scheme. Sanjay convinces the rudeboys to give him the stolen mobile phones, and he pays them very well in return. The rudeboys make a lot of money out of this dangerous business.

Jas looks up to Sanjay. He admires his way of life, intelligence, and education. He no longer tries to be a rudeboy like Hardjit and he starts to copy Sanjay instead. Jas asks Sanjay to help him seduce Samira Ahmed, a Muslim girl he has a crush on. Sanjay teaches Jas how to impress women. He gives him advice on what to say, what to wear, and where to eat. With Sanjay's help, Jas finds the courage to ask Samira out on a date. Samira and Jas have to keep their relationship secret because she is a Muslim and he is not: both her brothers and Jas's friends would disapprove because they are against interethnic and interreligious relationships.

Aside from the rudeboys, another character is Amit's older brother, Arun. He is engaged to a girl named Reena, but the lead-up to their future wedding is causing a lot of tension between their families, and between him and his parents, because they have different opinions about traditions and customs. Stuck between doing what his parents want him to do and what he wants to do, Arun ends up killing himself. Jas is held partly responsible for Arun's decision to commit suicide because he had interfered in Amit and Arun's family affairs by encouraging Arun to confront his parents about wanting to live his life in his own way. Amit stops talking to Jas, and so do Hardjit and Ravi, not just because

of Arun's death, but also because someone saw Jas and Samira together and told them about it. Samira breaks up with Jas shortly after that because of a disagreement about Arun's death and his obsessive jealousy.

Jas is left alone, he has no friends and no girlfriend. On top of that, Sanjay is after him because Arun's death has disrupted the delivery of mobile phones from the rudeboys. Sanjay blackmails Jas with pictures of him and Samira, and sends him to break into his father's mobile phone warehouse and to steal mobile phones. Jas gets attacked by three unidentified figures during the break-in. It is unclear whether they are Jas's three former friends, Samira's three brothers, or Sanjay's three henchmen. Jas is badly hurt and is sent to the hospital. Jas's parents visit him in the hospital, and an unexpected plot twist is revealed: Jas is a white British boy called Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden, and is not a desi rudeboy. The story ends with Jas flirting with a British Asian nurse, still acting like a rudeboy after the revelation of his true identity.

3. Theoretical Background

She wished to find out about this hazardous business of “passing,” this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly.

— Nella Larsen, *Passing*

This first chapter will provide a conceptual framework and theoretical basis for the understanding of passing. After summarising the history and the origins of the term and presenting the various forms of passing, I will touch upon some of the theories about and reflections on the notion of passing. Rather than attempting to give a comprehensive and detailed presentation of the topic, my aim is to offer a short overview that particularly focuses on the aspects that are most relevant to my study. Therefore, this chapter is based on a limited selection of publications collected from the vast amount of literature available on the topic of passing.¹ Another reason for this selection is that passing is not a straightforward phenomenon that can easily be explained, as it deals with issues of identity and authenticity — concepts for which definitions vary according to viewpoint. Considering the length of this dissertation, it would be impossible to go into detail about all the approaches to passing, seeing as each approach offers a different perspective on the matter depending on how “authentic identity” is defined.

The term “passing” was first introduced in the United States in the nineteenth century, in reference to black slaves who pretended to be free whites to escape from

¹ Studies that were not integrated into the following presentation include, for example, Maria C. Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, and Monique Rooney and Carolyn Strange.

slavery (Pelham 3, 29). This phenomenon was prompted by the “one-drop rule,” which was rooted in slavery and established during Jim Crow segregation (Khanna and Johnson 380; Pelham 41; Vaughn 8). According to this rule, a single drop of black blood made a person black (Khanna and Johnson 380; Vaughn 8). Even if a person had white ancestry and skin that looked visibly white, they were considered to be black because of their black ancestry, no matter how distant (Daniel 83, qtd. in Khanna and Johnson 381). This period is sometimes referred to as the “great age of passing” (Daniel 52, qtd. in Khanna and Johnson 382), with black people passing either by claiming or by creating a white identity (Pelham 47). Indeed, “[w]hiteness — even accidental whiteness — was a status card, an entry ticket to a free zone” (Pelham 47). Not only was it a way “to resist the racially restrictive one-drop rule and the racial status quo of the Jim Crow era” (Khanna and Johnson 380), but it also allowed black people “to gain access to privileges and opportunities” (Khanna and Johnson 382). As such, in segregated America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, passing as white was used by black people as a way to escape racial discrimination and oppression.

Although white-passing was viewed as an attractive option, it was restricted to a limited portion of the black population. Indeed, the ability to pass as white depended on factors such as skin colour and facial features, and those who did not look sufficiently white could not assume a new identity (Khanna and Johnson 382; Vaughn 4). People went to great lengths to hide their blackness, with some choosing to leave behind their old lives as black people in order to start new ones as white people somewhere else where their identity would not be put into question (Vaughn 4). In other words, passing comes with secrecy (Hostert 12). In addition to this, there was also the fact that it was dangerous to pass as white, the risk being that of exposure (Ginsberg 2). People who were sometimes

caught or discovered paid the price with their lives. Passing was thus not only secret, but it was also dangerous.

Because of the secrecy and danger involved, passing came to be seen as a deception (Ginsberg 8; Hostert 11; Khanna and Johnson 381). If someone was actually black, as defined by the social standards of the Jim Crow era, i.e. the one-drop rule, and was exposed for presenting himself or herself as white, “he or she was perceived as deceiving the public with a false identity” (Khanna and Johnson 381). Passing came to be associated with the idea of trespass (Ginsberg 3; Vaughn 9), more specifically “the trespass of crossing over the racial divide from black to white” (Vaughn 4). This view of passing as deception, first linked to racial passing in the US, is a characteristic of the concept that has persisted to this day.

In the US context, stories of enslaved black people escaping to freedom by passing as white became popular with the people and the media (Pelham 29). With this came the tradition of passing narratives, that is, the literature of race passing in the US, written by black and white authors alike (Ginsberg 9). There were real stories and also fictional stories of passing (Pelham 34). One of the most popular real-life examples of an enslaved person passing as white is the story of Ellen Craft, whose life was documented by her husband William Craft in his autobiography *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) (Pelham 30). The couple fled slavery in the South for freedom in the North in 1848, but were later forced to run again due to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which allowed bounty-hunters to track and capture escaped slaves not only in the Southern states but also in the Northern states (Pelham 30). Ellen and William Craft ultimately decided to leave America for England after several years on the run. The real life story of the Crafts is interesting in terms of passing because their escape involves several kinds of passings,

namely race, gender, class, and also disability performance (Pelham 30). Ellen was the daughter of a white slaver and a mixed-race enslaved woman, but she looked like her father's legitimate white children (Pelham 30). She used her deceptive appearance when she and her husband, who looked black, decided to escape by pretending that she was a white slaver and that he was her black slave. Because women were not allowed to own property, including slaves, Ellen also had to present herself as a man (Pelham 31), and because she could neither write nor read, she had to pretend to be disabled with her arm in a sling, to avoid having to sign anything (Pelham 31). Ellen Craft's story is a fascinating account of passing in America, because it includes more than mere racial passing.

In terms of fictional stories of passing, the novel on slavery by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), was one of the most popular (Pelham 34). In Stowe's story, Eliza Harris and her family manage to flee to Canada by altering their appearance in order not to be recognised as black slaves. Eliza, for instance, pretends to be a white man, and she disguises her son Harry as a white girl named Harriet (Pelham 35). George, Eliza's husband, is too dark to pass as white, and so decides to darken his skin to make himself look like a Spaniard and calls himself Henry Butler (Pelham 35). As such, passing is not only a social phenomenon but also a literary trope (Hostert 9), with fiction reflecting reality.

Although the notion of passing is connected to the history of racial prejudice and discrimination in the US, the act itself has occurred for much longer before that (Pelham 4). Indeed, passing is a very ancient practice, which has existed for millennia (Dawkins xii; Moriel 169). In *Passing and Performance* (2005), Liora Moriel suggests that instances of passing can be found in literary texts from ancient times (169). She gives the example of the Torah, and the story of Abraham who ordered his wife Sara to pretend to be

his sister in order to avoid being harmed during their journey from Canaan to Egypt (169). Still in the Torah, Moriel explains how Abraham's daughter-in-law, Rebecca, passed off her favourite son, Jacob, the second-born, as Esau, the first-born of the twins, so that he would be blessed with the birthright by Isaac (Moriel 169). According to Moriel, these stories can be interpreted as a form of passing because there is a movement from one identity to another (167). This shows that, although passing is primarily linked to racial passing in America, it can be discussed in a more global context of identity performance.

As such, the notion of passing can be associated with other performances of identity. As exemplified by the stories of the Crafts and the Harrises, passing does not only concern race, but can also be extended to gender, class, nationality, and sexuality (Moriel 177). These different types of passing are similar to racial passing, in the sense that they also refer to the crossing from one identity into another. The goal for a person is to gain acceptance as a member of a group that is other than his or her own (Dawkins xii). These forms of passing are often described and viewed in the same manner as racial passing, that is, as a transgression and a usurpation of identity (Ginsberg 2).

Passing has been studied in various research fields. In *Passing: A Strategy to Dissolve Identities and Remap Differences* (2007), Anna C. Hostert transforms the concept of passing from its original meaning as a social practice into a universal tool to redefine social, ethnic, gender, and religious identity. In her book, Hostert generalises the concept of passing from the US context to apply it to how individuals deal with identities that straddle recognised identity categories. Her theory is based on the idea that individuals are not limited by fixed identity roles and practices, but instead have multiple identities which allow them to experience the world through various lenses, making passing a perpetual process of identity formation.

An interesting work is *Passing & Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility* by Pamela Caughie (1999). Her work focuses on how identities are presented in academic writing and popular culture, both in art and in life. She uses examples from a variety of texts to demonstrate the dynamics of passing, which she argues is not the assumption of a fake identity, but the adoption of any identity. She looks at how passing can be applied for the purposes of teaching. In her analysis, Caughie discusses the ambivalence that exists in the academic world about teaching material that is not proper to one's own ethnicity, culture or gender. She sees this ambivalence as a form of passing, whereby the teacher has to take on the responsibility of teaching about identity groups that they do not represent.

One of the most recent publications on passing is *Passing: An Alternative History of Identity* by Lipika Pelham (2021). In her book, Pelham reflects on the multiple ways in which identity is variable and transformative, with passing at the centre of the discussion. Her work covers a wide range of subjects, from the history of passing, the different types of passing, the various theories around passing performances. It is an interesting contribution to the literature about passing because it includes recent developments in the field of passing studies, namely the issue of cultural appropriation.

Nowadays, discussions about passing revolve mostly around identity performances, with the main question being who has the right to present themselves and how. For example, there was a discussion in the English media in 2022 about the footballer Garry Lineker, who spoke about how he was bullied for having darker skin (Okundaye). People found it hard to sympathise with him because they found that he was not dark enough as a white man to be the victim of racism. This case highlights the fragility of identity categories, in this case skin colour being a factor for why an individual might be considered to belong to one group or another, similarly as with racial passing in the US in

the nineteenth century. There are also discussions around fictionalised stories of passing, one example being the novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen, which is responsible for the popular understanding of the term passing today (Pelham 49). Published in 1929, and adapted into a movie in 2022, the story follows two African American women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Both women pass as white, the first by accident, the other by design. Irene manages to live in white spaces due to her white appearance, while Clare chooses to do it as a form of exile. The novel, considered to be a foundational work in passing studies, brought back into the public debate the topic of passing as a relevant contemporary issue.

4. The Rudeboys: Passing as Escaping

I know you boys are always shaking each other's hands and talking in code under your breath, but what is this? The Hounslow mafia or something?

— Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani*

First and foremost, it is necessary to define what the word “rudeboy” means in *Londonstani*. The origin of the word can be traced back to Jamaica in the 1960s, where “rude boy” was used to describe “juvenile delinquents and criminals” (Liao 44). It was introduced in Britain by the West Indian immigration (Tomczak 218), where “rudeboy” became a British slang word that was used to describe young delinquents involved in street culture during the late 1970s and early 1980s (Liao 44). The term can be spelled as one or two words, “rudeboy” or “rude boy,” and can also be abbreviated to “rudies,” with alternative ways of spellings (Tomczak 218). The rudeboy profile was considered attractive in youth circles “because of its glamori[s]ed image of archetypal rebels” (Tomczak 218). The rudeboys were recognisable by their appearance and behaviour, described as “[s]martly dressed, self-assured, and full of bravado” (Tomczak 219). Rudeboys “live[] for the luminous moment,” and are eager to “test their strength against the law” (Hebdige, qtd. in Tomczak 218–19). In conclusion, “rudeboy” is a slang word of Jamaican origin, referring to a young delinquent recognisable by its street style and attitude.

In *Londonstani*, a “rudeboy” is a “desi,” and is used like the word “homeboy” (5). There are various explanations for its meaning. Some scholars argue that the word “desi” comes from Sanskrit meaning “countryman” or “one from our country” (Hakkarainen 12;

Liao 45), or “‘local’, ‘native’, and ‘country’” in Hindi (Komatsu 97). Other scholars argue that the word “desi,” which also exists as “deshi,” is a generic term for “countryman,” but that it derives from Hinglish, a blend of English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu (Tomczak 218). In Britain and America, the term “desi” is used to refer to people from the South Asian diaspora (Master-Stevens 114). In the article “What’s Right with Asian Boys”, Malkani explains that the term is usually applied to people from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, but it can also be extended to include terms like Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim. In the glossary of the American version of the novel, Malkani explains that “desi” is used as a “self-referential term for the Indian diaspora that refers to people and culture” (qtd. in Komatsu 102). In Britain, the term “desi” is commonly used as a slang for “a contemporary urban subculture [involving] second-generation youths from the subcontinent [and] ethnically hybrid cultural trends in music, dance, food, and fashion” (Paganoni and Pedretti 425). A desi rudeboy can thus be defined as a young delinquent of Indian origin. With that being said, Malakani’s rudeboys are not standard desi rudeboys.

Although they consider themselves as such, the rudeboys in *Londonstani* are not desi rudeboys. This seems to be implied by Jas who gives other appellations for the group: “People’re always tryin to stick a label on our scene. That’s the problem with havin a fucking scene. First we was rudeboys, then we be Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, fuckin Indobrits” (5). This seems to suggest that the rudeboys are not to be limited to the name that they give themselves and that is used to identify them. Regarding the desi aspect of their identity, they stand in opposition to the standard definition of “desi” as being rudeboy is not limited to a question of ethnicity (Lente 169). If that were the case, Jas, who is a white British boy, would not have been able to join the

group of the rudeboys. They are also not classic “rudeboys” in the sense that, despite the fact that they act like they are delinquents, like the original rudeboys, they are only pretending that they are. In this way, it seems that the rudeboys have constructed their own identity which they then perform based on the characteristics that they have chosen as identifiers for themselves, with “desi rudeboy” serving as a self-chosen label (Lente 172). To be a *Londonstani* rudeboy is a matter of speech and behaviour.

The most important aspect of the identity of the rudeboys is that they have to be masculine. For the rudeboys, being masculine is mainly about what you look like and what you sound like. This is especially true for Hardjit who is the role model and leader of the rudeboys. Jas describes him as perfect, “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” (4). He has perfected his “designer desiness” (4) by wearing Dolce & Gabbana and Nike Air Force Ones. He also spends a long time getting ready for his outings, in order to ensure that he will impress the people he comes across.

This is reflected in the hard work that he puts in his body. “Bodybuilding and muscular appearance are commonly linked to masculinity,” which the rudeboys are obsessed with proving and showing (Hakkarainen 112). For this reason, as Jas explains, “[Hardjit]’d worked every major muscle group, down the gym, every other day since he was fuckin fourteen years old” (5). His arms are so muscular that “he probably could[] fit a whole page a Holy Scriptures on his biceps if he wanted to” (5). Hardjit, with his “his designer desi garms, a tiger tattooed on his left shoulder an a Sikh Khanda symbol on his right bicep” (5), is the epitome of an alpha male figure for the rudeboys (Hakkarainen 86). As such, Hardjit uses his physical appearance in order to project a front of strength and manliness.

In fact, Hardjit is obsessed with his physical appearance and presentation. The passage where this is most visible is where Hardjit prepares for his fight with Tariq:

He'd chosen the Adidas tracksuit top carefully this morning, standin in front a his full-length mirror an comparing it to his Nike tracksuit top (which din't show his shoulders enough), his tight leather jack (which showed his pecs too much), a Ted Baker top (which showed too much bicep) an his Schott bomber jacket (which din't show anything). (86)

Hardjit spends a lot of time in front of the mirror because he wants to dress to impress (85). However, in the same passage, Jas points out that the way in which Hardjit gets ready makes him look like a hooker: "I just sat there in his room, pretendin to be readin some Bollywood magazine, tryin not to see the mirror's reflection in his other mirror, thinkin to myself: This must be what high-class hookers are like before they go out on a job" (86). This way, Hardjit's obsession for his own body works against his desire to appear manly, as it makes him look like a girl.

The appreciation for the muscled body of the rudeboys seems to be shared by the girls in the story. At some point in the text, Jas mentions how the common room of the school is sometimes used for beauty contests between the boys, who like to show off their muscles by wearing tight-fitting tops (190). The girls also like to make the boys take their shirts off, and make them pose and parade for them (190). The whole thing resembles a Mr Universe contest, with the girls judging and ranking the boys based on their looks (190). In this passage, Jas seems to imply that the genders roles are reversed, with boys acting

like girls (Hakkarainen 113). In this way, the muscles that the rudeboys use to define their masculinity make them look feminine, which is the opposite of what they are aiming for.

Showing their body to girls is how the rudeboys prove their masculinity to others, and to prove to each other that they are men, the rudeboys like to boast about all the things that they do with girls (Lente 177). However, it turns out that the rudeboys have little experience with girls. With the exception of Jas who is in a secret relationship with Samira, the rudeboys do not have any dating life or sexual life to prove what they are saying. This can be seen from a discussion between the rudeboys. After they drive past a beautiful girl walking down the street, Amit says that she is not as beautiful as another girl who he has had sex with: “Dat gyal ain’t nothin, if yous lot wanna see proper fitness you shoulda seen dis bitch I shagged last weekend. Harpinder was her name. Imagine if Aishwarya Rai n Shilpa Shetty had a twenty-one-year-old love child” (19). It seems to be more fantasy than reality, as Jas replies: “Yeh, I bet ‘imagine’ is the right word seein as how you probly imagined the whole thing yourself” (19). Amit tries to defend himself by saying that Jas is jealous of him (19), but this does not impress Hardjit who agrees with Jas that Amit made the story up (20). This example shows that the experiences that the rudeboys have with girls are limited to the stories that they tell each other; this means that their sexuality is between boys and not with girls, which goes against their construction of masculinity.

Not only girls, but also boys seem to be fascinated with the male body, and more specifically Jas, who gives detailed descriptions of Hardjit’s body and physical appearance. What is interesting is that some of these descriptions seem to have homosexual undertones (Mitchell, qtd. in Hakkarainen 87). One example of this can be found in the passage where Jas describes how Hardjit is getting ready for his fight with Tariq:

Today he'd even kept his muscles under wraps in a baggy, long-sleeve Adidas tracksuit top, his firm body a new Audi concept car waitin to be unveiled at the Geneva motor show by Czech supermodels wearin nothin but high heels, kachhian an dry-ice mist. Like the curve a the bonnet underneath the drapes, you could only just make out Hardjit's shoulder muscles showin through the tracksuit top. That way, all the other bulges in his chest an arms would look even more bulging when he eventually stripped off into the Versace vest underneath. (85–86)

The way in which Jas describes Hardjit's body has seductive undertones in a way. He talks about how Hardjit's curves are hidden underneath the layers of his clothing, and how he will look when he strips his clothes off. It is unclear whether or not Jas's admiration for Hardjit might be attraction, but his fascination for his body still leaves the possibility for homoeroticism (Sunar 14–15). In this way, the efforts that the rudeboys, and especially Hardjit, put in sculpting their bodies and perfecting their looks do not have the effect of making them look more manly, but instead more feminine.

The language that the rudeboys speak is another important part of their identity. The language is meant as an expression and a reflection of the group of the rudeboys. One main use of the language is that it serves as a means to assert their masculinity. For this reason, it is "tough, aggressive, disrespectful" (Paganoni and Pedretti 434). As Sarah Brouillette points out, there seems to be a conflation of the violence of the language and the physical violence (3). For example, when Hardjit attacks Daniel for calling him a "Paki," the way in which Hardjit's words come out is violent, as he "spit[s them] out" in Daniel's face (3). It is also reinforced in the text, with Jas making a

link between the physical and the verbal, by describing Hardjit's kick as an "exclamation mark," giving emphasis to the violence of the act (3). This shows that the language, meant to assert the masculinity of the rudeboys, is violent and aggressive.

The language is also a way for the rudeboys to signal their identity to others. When Jas details the different "rudeboy rules" that are set by Hardjit, he explains that there is a rule, rule number four in the book, on how to use the "proper rudeboy words": "According to Hardjit, it don't matter if the proper word for something sounds fuckin ridiculous. If it's the proper word then it's the proper word" (45). Only a rudeboy can understand the language of the rudeboys, furthering their sense of identity as a group. "The cultivation of proper rudeboy words," as Lynda Ng puts it (85), allows the rudeboys to move beyond the identity that was initially theirs, and further solidify the one that they have chosen for themselves.

One way that the rudeboys like to express their masculinity is by describing anything that does not fit their ideals of masculinity in derogatory terms. This is especially the case with homosexuals, and the rudeboys use a lot of homophobic terms, such as "ponce" (effeminate), or "batty" or "batty boy" (homosexual), which they also tend to use to refer to "coconuts" (Paganoni and Pedretti 435), a "coconut" being "a person who is brown outside, but white inside" (Paganoni and Pedretti 430). This way, the language of the rudeboys is not only a way for them to consolidate the masculine aspect of their identity, but it also a way for them to reject the men who they find are not manly enough.

That being said, although the rudeboys like to use the language to impress and insult those who are not part of their group, they do not always use it. Indeed, they use their gangsta language in the streets, but the same cannot be said at home. When they are in the presence of their parents, their language changes (Renna, *Talking Like a (Foreign)*

Man 6). For example, when Amit is on the phone with his mother, he is polite and he does not use swear words, “because he knows this would not be convenient nor appreciated by his mum” (Renna, “Talking Like a (Foreign) Man” 6):

Amit takes his Nokia 6610 back an starts makin a call beside me. He’s being all polite an in’t using no swear word or nothing so is clearly chattin to his mum. But he makes sure he don’t *look* like he’s chattin to his mum, narrowin his eyes, suckin in his cheeks an noddin as he stares out the window.

...

— Theekh hai, he goes. — Flour an eggs. Free range. I’ll get it, Mama.
Alright, Mum, theekh hai (16).

The fact that the rudeboys do not always use their language reinforces the idea that it is something that they have come up with themselves. When talking about the language of the rudeboys, Michael Mitchell uses the word “fabric,” (qtd. in Liao 52) which suggests it is something that rudeboys can put on and off, like a performance. This is similar to the phrasing used by James Graham, who calls it a “linguistic performance” (““This In’t Good Will Hunting”).

Like the rest of their identity, the language that the rudeboys use is a construction. The language that the rudeboys speak is not standard English nor Punjabi, “but a language made of encounters, clashes, and hybridi[s]ation” (Renna, “Language and Identity” 266). It has been defined in many different ways by various authors, such as “idiolect” (Paganoni and Pedretti 430), “patois” or “creole” (Liao 64), but Malkani calls it “slang”

(“About *Londonstani*”). It is essentially an enriched version of London street slang (Paganoni and Pedretti 430), with “a variety of different linguistic influences” (Slåttum 62) borrowed from a mix of Punjabi and African American English (Renna, “Language and Identity” 266). Examples of words from London street slang are “fit” (good looking) and “sorted” (fixed, dealt with) (Slåttum 62). There are also words taken from hip-hop slang influenced by black American and English music, like “bling” (flashy jewellery or ornaments) and “homeboy” (friend) (Slåttum 62). The rudeboys also use some Punjabi slang, like “kiddaan” (how are you?) and “pendhu” (a fool), as well as popular Americanisms, for example “crew” (a person’s friends, entourage) and “feds” (police), and also SMS and text idioms, like “U” (you) and “2” (to/too) (Slåttum 62). The language is so hard to understand that the book comes with a glossary at the end for the reader’s comprehension (Liao 64).²

The language is not only constructed but also fictional; indeed, Malkani created it (Slåttum 69). As Dohra Ahmad points out in her introduction to *Rotten English* (2007), the language in *Londonstani* is not actually a language spoken by anyone (24). On his own website, Malkani explains that instead of reproducing the language that he had recorded during his research for his dissertation, he incorporated different popular slang words from various periods (Slåttum 69). His goal was to build a hybrid language that a broad range of readers would recognise, and not just give a picture of the language at a specific point in time (Slåttum 69). This is how Malkani created the language:

² There is only a glossary in the American version of the novel, but not in the editions published in England and India (Komatsu 99n11).

I took words from when I was at school in Hounslow in the late 1980s and early 1990s that people still use today. Then I took words that have stood the test of time from the interviews I did for my university dissertation in the mid-late 1990s (which luckily I'd captured on dictaphone cassette as well as notebooks). And then I combined all of that with words being used today that I think will probably survive. So from each stage of the research I was trying to bin words that might not survive (even if they were more interesting and trendy at the time) and replace them either with other, more enduring slang words or just plain English. ("About *Londonstani*")³

The artificiality of the language "adds another dimension of inauthenticity to the novel," and it also "echoes the inauthentic identities of the [rudeboys]" (Liao 64).

Another part of what being a man means for the rudeboys is being a gangster. To do so, they draw inspiration from various sources, more specifically from their idols, such rappers from the America and actors from Bollywood. One part of being their gangster behaviour, is that they like to drive around in their car and play loud music to impress the people driving past them. However, the car that the rudeboys cruise around is not Ravi's, but belongs to his mother (25). The colour of the car is lilac, a feminine colour, which Ravi tries to pass off as his favourite colour for a woman's underwear: "He said lilac was his favourite colour a ladies' underwear an he wanted the outside a the car to match the

³ It should be mentioned that Maria C. Paganoni and Roberto Pedretti interpret this excerpt in a different way in their article. They see it as an indication from Malkani that the language is authentic (431). I do not think that this is the case, because Malkani describes how he modified the language for the book and he specifies that his version of the language is not used by anybody.

panties pulled off inside” (14). The plate registration of the car is also “K4VIT4”, which stands for “Kavita,” and is in fact his mother’s name (25). The colour and the car plate clash with the manly exterior that the rudeboys want to project (Allen 181). Not only that, but they are also only allowed to use the car if their mothers can send them off to run their errands for them, which makes them look childish. This is an indication that the rudeboy identity is all about show and staging.

The rudeboys pretend that they are gangsters from the ghetto, but it is far from being the case (Komatsu 103; Liao 51). Hounslow is not a ghetto but an affluent area in London populated by middle class people. This can be seen in a description that Jas gives while he is driving around with his friends:

[A]ll the houses round here had got their front gardens concreted over and turned into driveways. Big wheelie rubbish bins and recycling boxes where the plants, flower beds and garden paths between them used to be. . . . All of them had satellite TV dishes next to the main bedroom window, stuck up there like framed dentists’ diploma certificates. . . . [Y]ou could still tell if it was a desi house if there was more than one satellite dish. One for Zee TV and one for Star Plus, probly. (17)

Their surroundings are not adapted to suit their imagined world of gangsters. This shows that the rudeboys pretend to live a life in a place that is not representative of their performance. The rudeboys are not poor kids from lower income families who live on a council estate. On the contrary, they seem to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. They drive expensive cars, such as Mercedes-Benzes, BMWs, and Audis. They also wear designer

clothes and brand shoes, as well as luxury jewellery and watches. They do not live in small council houses but in rich family houses, as exemplified by the houses of Hardjit and Amit. Hardjit lives in a five-bedroom house, complete with a master bathroom with shower and jacuzzi (59), while the house of Amit has “expensive coffee tables with the golden legs” and “expensive silk an satin sheets that’d been laid down especially to protect the carpet” (82). This is all provided by their fathers who have good jobs and earn good incomes. Hardjit’s father is a successful businessman who runs “nine twenty-four-hour local convenience shops in partnership with two a his cousins,” (73) Amit’s father is involved in “the aeroplane caring business he [runs] with his brothers,” (73) and Ravi’s father “[offers] financial advice from behind an IBM Thinkpad” and “[makes] good bucks by it” (76). In other words, the lifestyle of the rudeboys is not compatible with the ghetto life that they pretend to live.

The performative aspect of the rudeboy characters is particularly highlighted in the following passage, which describes the arrival of the rudeboys on the scene of a fight between Hardjit and Tariq:

We strode into the track like a bunch a badass Reservoir Dogs. Me on the left, Amit next to me, Hardjit next to him an Ravi flanking on the right. Badasses. Appearing over the horizon in a fly film with a Vin Diesel in it. Fire, foiled feds an fifty burning baddies behind us. Rescued females in front a us. Fit, fine females, their long hair blowing in the helicopter wind, walkin towards us with their tight skirts and hips ridin in time with our shoulders an the drum machine set to some big pumpin beat in our heads. Not too fast a beat, though, so that we could feel the moment, enjoy the feel

a stridin up to Tariq's crew as if we'd already fuckin won. Hardjit set the proper pace. Left. He always set the pace. Right. Otherwise our bobbing up an down would make us look like a bunch a penguins or something. Gangsta penguins, mind you, with shrapnel in their legs from some swim-by shooting or someshit. Left. Right. Or maybe just penguins who really needed a piss. (99)

It is clear that the rudeboys are not gangsters, but they like to imagine that they are (Hakkarainen 106). Like the actors in an action movie, they are pretending to be. The fight is intended to serve as a showcase to display their physical strength and prowess, the main purpose of the rudeboys being to be noticed and admired by the girls. They are literally putting on a show. The way in which Jas describes himself, Amit, Hardjit, and Ravi conveys the image of a staged and choreographed performance, as they move in a synchronised and rhythmic manner. This has the effect of making them appear less like the members of a gang and more like the members of a boy band. The ridiculousness of the situation is not lost on Jas who compares them to penguins. This adds a touch of humour to the scene, which undermines the badass attitude that the rudeboys want to project to their audience. They want to come across as the bad guys that they see in action movies but they end up embarrassing themselves by trying too hard to impress with their gangster-like gait, resembling more “dancing penguins” than “badass dogs”.

This is also reflected in Hardjit's hardness, which is just posturing (Whitlock 2), even down to his name. Indeed, Hardjit changed the spelling of his name to make it sound more masculine (Hakkarainen 87). His real name is Harjit but he inserted a 'd' in between the letters 'r' and 'j', as Hardjit, to make the point that he is hard (Elia 3): “Ain't nobody

here call'd Harjit either. It's Hardjit with a d." (116) As Brouillette puts it, changing his name from Harjit to Hardjit is a way for him to "[spell out] his appreciation for his own macho physique." (3) This reflects the superficiality of Hardjit's character. This is brought up by Mr Ashwood who confronts Hardjit about the spelling and pronunciation of his name (Hakkarainen 87):

— R u deaf, man? I said da name's Hardjit. Hardjit, innit. Wid a d in it, innit.

— I've never known it to be spelt that way before.

— Well, now u do, a'ight.

— No, actually I don't. Don't think you can terrorise me like you did all the other teachers here. Don't think you can pen me as one of those teachers who can't pronounce Asian names just because you've decided you prefer it spelt or pronounced a new way. I wasn't born yesterday.

— Nah, man u ain't listenin, people really call me Hardjit now. Jus check wid ma crew.

— If you check with your parents I think you'll find your name is Harjit. You were quite happy being called Harjit when you attended this school and if I remember rightly your parents were quite happy calling you Harjit. So unless you've changed your name by deed poll, I'll call you Harjit. (117)

Hardjit, who insists on being called by his new name, is exposed as a poseur by Mr Ashwood who demonstrates the shallowness and foolishness of his change of name (Hakkarainen 87). Changing his name does not make him more manly, but more childish.

This shows that, despite Hardjit's status as the leader of the gang, it does not mean that he is a better or a more accurate representation of what a rudeboy should be, as his identity is also a matter of performance. What hints at this reasoning is the use of the word "front," which Jas uses to describe Hardjit's way with words: "Me, I was jealous a his front — what someone like Mr Ashwood'd call a person's linguistic prowess or his debating dexterity or someshit" (4). The word "front," when used in the sense of "putting on a front," refers to the idea of pretending to be someone else (Master-Stevens 127). Even though the word is used to refer to Hardjit's language, it can be seen as an indication that he is not who he pretends to be. The word "front" is used in another passage, when Hardjit is fighting with Ravi over a stolen mobile phone. Jas notes that his laugh resembles that of a Bollywood star:

A big Bollywood laughter moment this. Ha ha. Hah hah haha. Hah hahahaha. An just like all them Bollywood laughs, it turned out to be just another classic Hardjit front. Make your foe feel comfortable before makin them uncomfortable, just for effect or someshit.

— Show me da fuckin fone, Ravi, or I break yo fuckin face. (72)

The fact that the word "front" is coupled with the idea that Hardjit is acting implies that there is an element of performance to his character, like an actor in a Bollywood movie. In another passage, Hardjit is compared to the hero of a Bollywood movie: "The only reason he'd started backin me up was so that he could act like Shah Rukh Khan in front a all the ladies. The Bollywood hero always takes care a the underdog, you see" (56). Even one of the rudeboy rules, rule number seven, is a reference to Bollywood movies:

“It’s Basic Bollywood for Beginners. In situations that involve defending or rescuing a fit lady, you can stand tall with your front intact even if all your crew walk out on you or try to thapparh you. They call it being a hero” (61). Many of the things that Hardjit does are for show. All of these examples referring to the notion of a “front” reinforces the idea that the rudeboy persona is a fictionally imagined and constructed persona. As such, Hardjit’s rudeboyness, which serves as a guide for the group, is in fact a matter of performance.

Humour plays an important role in deconstructing the image of the rudeboys (Renna, “Talking Like a (Foreign) Man” 6). Not only do the rudeboys make themselves ridiculous by acting and talking like they do, but they are also made ridiculous by other characters who disrupt their performance. This is especially the case for the mothers and aunties of the rudeboys. One example of this can be found in the passage where the rudeboys are on their way to the fight with Tariq. Amit’s mum calls him and asks him to pick up a few items from the pharmacy for her. She wants “lavender oil an these pills called At Ease to help her sleep. She also wants some Rimmel 007 rose lipstick, the greeny-blue pack a Bodyform (with wings) an some pink Andrex bog roll as they’ve run out” (92–93). When Amit goes to the checkout, he realises that the girl who works there is Sonia Guha, the girlfriend of another rudeboy, who he has a crush on (94–95). Amit panics at the idea of her seeing him with the feminine products that he is buying for his mother, and he tries to balance it out with more manly products:

Dolce & Gabbana cologne; Gillette Mach3 shaving blades; a sexy-lookin chrome shaving brush; FCUK deodorant; Givenchy Rouge aftershave; muscle rub for sporting injuries; bodybuilding protein shakes; some designer hair wax; Boot’s own-brand dental floss. But from Amit’s face you

can tell that somehow it isn't enough. So he heads straight for the condoms and grabs a box of 24 Durex avanti. (95)

It seems to do the trick, as Sonia is so impressed by the condoms and the other products that Amit added that she does not seem to pay attention to the rest of his shopping. Amit's plan backfires when one of his mother's friends surprises him as he is leaving (96). She threatens to tell his mother about the condoms, and he tries to defend himself by showing her all the things that he was embarrassed about, in an attempt to prove to her that the shopping is for his mother, and that the condoms are for his parents. Amit is so worried about his mother finding out about the condoms that he drops the act, and he prefers being embarrassed in front of the girl that he likes instead of facing punishment from his mother. Whenever the rudeboys are confronted with their mothers, they go back to who they are, that is, children. As a result, the gangster attitude that the rudeboys put on is revealed being a performance, which has the effect of making them look ridiculous.

This is a repeated occurrence in the novel, with the mothers of the rudeboys treating them like children and revealing their rudeboy persona. Another example is when the rudeboys are at Hardjit's house to unblock stolen phones for their illegal business of. Hardjit's mother brings food to his room, and it looks almost as if they are having a tea party:

Hardjit's mum came in the room with her tied-back silver hair and with her matching silver tray full of samosas, pakoras, glasses of Coke and cups of chai. Aunty always made sure her samosas weren't as hollow as most aunties made them, her pakoras not too oily, her chai not too masalafied and her Coke

not too flat an with slices a lemon an some crushed ice made by their top-a-the-range fridge. We could've done without the red chilli sauce, though I'm positive we din't look like we needed frilly pink paper doilies . . . [S]he handed us a mini-plate an then Shukriya again as she put a dollop a that red napalm in it. (68)

The behaviour of Hardjit's mother projects a young, and almost girlish, image of the rudeboys. This is reinforced by the fact that Hardjit's mother also scolds them for making too much noise while she has guests (72). She reprimands them like children, which is indicated by the fact that she tells them "no toys on bed" (73) to refer to the phones that they have stolen and that they are in the process of deactivating. Once again, this makes their gangster activities look like they are playing a game, and making them look like little boys. This way, whenever the rudeboys are in the presence of their mothers or if their mothers are mentioned, they are treated like children and they also behave like children, which results in their performance being ridiculed. These are one of many episodes in the novel which serve as a reminder that despite the fact that they act like gangsters, the rudeboys are still children. The association of these two elements that do not go together, the mummy's boy and the gangster, is responsible for much of the humour in the novel, creating extremely humorous and very enjoyable scenes in the story (Slåttum 11).

The idea that the rudeboys are playing a game is mentioned by Mr Ashwood. After he saves them from getting arrested by the police, Ravi tries to steal his phone to replace another one that he has damaged but Mr Ashwood catches him in the act (112–13). He asks the rudeboys to follow him into his office where they try to intimidate him. Mr Ashwood knows what they are trying to do, and he tells them that they look ridiculous:

— . . . I know you boys are always shaking each other's hands and talking in code under your breath, but what is this? The Hounslow mafia or something?

— Yeh, man, nobody messes wid us, we bad muthafuckas, Ravi said, gettin all excited an using the fact that he was standin up as an excuse to adopt one of his gangsta-rap poses. With his neck raised now an givin it another lick-a-shot flick with his right hand, he continues: — Da gangsta, da killa n da dope dealer.

. . .

— I cannot believe you're sitting there and aspiring to be a gangsta at a time like this, Ravi. Because if you want that kind of notoriety, then quite frankly I could fulfil your fantasy by calling the police and having you arrested while they search your houses for stolen phones. Do you realise how serious this is? At the risk of feeling your homophobia, I've got you boys by the balls haven't I? So, please, just stop coming over all rap star with me, sunshine. (122–23)

In this passage, Mr Ashwood exposes the truth about the identity of the rudeboys. Mr Ashwood tells Ravi that if he wants to be a gangster, he has to go to jail. He says that it is part of a fantasy, turning their gangster attitude into a childish play pretend game (Renna, "Talking Like A (Foreign) Man" 8).

The rudeboys base their collective identity on principles of inclusion and exclusion, and they have established a divide between those inside the group and those outside (Tomczak 219). They reject anything that does not resemble their ideals. The rudeboys

identify them by their appearance, language, cars, music, and fashion (Tomczak 219). People outside the group of the rudeboys are “goras” (white people and non-Desis), “ponces and lesbians” (homosexuals), and “coconuts,” people who are brown on the outside but white on the inside (20). They are also called “Bounty bars, Oreo biscuits or any other fuckin food that was white on the inside” (23). The rudeboys especially hate the coconuts because they think that they are embarrassed about being desi and by desi culture (22). For this reason, the rudeboys try to avoid doing anything that might be related to a coconut, and they like to make fun of them. For example at some point in the story, they harass a coconut who drives a Peugeot 305, has long hair, has a grunge look, has a novel and newspaper, and has Coldplay song playing in the car (20–21). These things are typical of the “gay batty boy” for the rudeboys, and they insult him by calling him “poncey,” “batty,” and “faggot”. The boys insult the coconuts for being too effeminate, or rather, for not being rudeboy enough. For the rudeboys, the concept of masculinity is so closely related to their identity, that being gay, meaning not bring manly, is an insult. This is the best way for the rudeboys to make fun of other Indians who do not have the same lifestyle as them, or more precisely, who have a British lifestyle.

In fact, it is possible that the reason for the rudeboy to have created their own identity is due to a refusal to conform to the norms of mainstream British society. This is one way of understanding the rudeboy identity, as a rejection of assimilation. Unlike their children, the parents of the rudeboys worked hard to fit into British society (Slåttum 50). One way that they have attempted to do so is by changing their accents. In the book, it is said that they have posh accents, which is probably an accented version of Standard British English. Ravi’s parents, for example, have “a posh, poncified accent” (179). Ravi’s father uses his accent at work, and a more vernacular way of speaking at home. Jas says that

Ravi's father is on "Bombay mode" when he is at home, and Ravi's mother says that his accent sounds "Straight off the bloody boat" (179). Despite their efforts to integrate, they still experience racism, stereotyping, and prejudice (Slåttum 50). Their difficult situation is pointed out by Ravi's father, who at some point says:

Why to pay the government? For what? So they can dig up roads and give me traffic jam? So they can pay dole money to lazy people who call my family Pakis when they come into my brother's shop to spend their dole money on beer and cigarettes? They get lung cancer and I pay for their hospital. Bhanchods. NHS? Hah! I work like dog for private health, Indian food is better there. Defence? Bloody fool Americans should pay for it. Education? Fat lump of good it is, our beats keep failing the A-levels. Anyway, I pay enough taxes. . . . I always tell my son, you want me to pay my taxes? I'll pay from your pocket money. I'll pay from your sister's dowry fund. As far as I'm concerned, Jas, we pay our taxes to *Her Majesty's* Inland Revenue. And when I think like this, I think of the Crown Jewels. And though my son keeps complaining that his mother and I speak like British royalty, you know what the Crown jewels make me think of? India.

(181–82)

This can explain why the rudeboys want to be different from their parents, as a way for them to be protected from the discrimination faced by immigrants and foreigners. Mr Ashwood also explicitly mentions the efforts that the parents of the rudeboys had to make in order to be accepted into British society: "Do you boys have any idea how hard

your parents worked and how hard they fought to accepted by mainstream society?” (126)

However, discrimination does not seem to be an issue for the rudeboys who care more about not being British, than they do about being treated unfairly because of their Indian origins. Mr Ashwood points out the difference between the rudeboys and their parents. He says: “[Y]ou boys do have some kind of worrying anti-integration, anti-assimilation ethic going on and quite frankly I don’t intend to rest this old body of mine until today’s youth culture stops being so divided along ethnic lines” (126). For the rudeboys, their parents “had to suck British butts” to be accepted (126). They see it as “a betrayal of their cultural roots and as a sign of weakness” (Lente 174). They find their parents’ attempts at looking more British “disgustin,” and they feel like they have to “teach em some muthafuckin self-respect” (126). For instance, they dislike their parents’ loose exercise of religion, for example by sending out Christmas cards with nativity scenes (79) or by blending of Sikh and Hindu gods (51). With that being said, the rudeboys are not better at incorporating religion into their life. While Amit and Ravi are critical of their parents’ “lack of religiousness,” Hardjit’s father complains that Hardjit “abuses his Sikh religion,” (340) which he sees as an instrumentalisation “to play ‘the hard boy’” (Lente 174). In addition, it could even be argued that the rudeboys are like their parents, as they also blend religions. Before Hardjit and Tariq’s fight, Ravi tells Jas that he does not have to worry about the police catching them, as they will be protected from a nearby church (87). Like their parents and their Christmas cards, the rudeboys are inconsistent in their respect of religion, as they refer to the Christian God as protection, and not a Sikh or a Hindu god.

In conclusion, this section illustrates how the rudeboys have constructed a new identity in order to resist the one that is typically assigned to British Asians in order to

avoid being assimilated into mainstream British society. However, each time they try to be rudeboys, it is possible to see that they are pretending. As a result, it almost looks as if they are playing a game at times, which makes them look like a parody of themselves.

5. Jas: Passing as Existing

You're not like them.

— Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani*

This chapter aims at providing an analysis of the main character and narrator, the white British boy Jas, in his attempt to be recognised as a rudeboy. Attention will be paid to his failures and motivations. Out of all the characters of the novel, “Jas is the one who appears to work the hardest to belong” (Moslund 122). Indeed, it is not easy for him to follow the rudeboy life. He envies the other boys’ “perfectly authentic rudeboy front” (5). He believes that they are better at being rudeboys than him, and this despite the fact that “[he has] watched as much MTV Base and Juggy D videos as they have” (6). Despite his efforts, Jas cannot manage to “attain the right level a rudeboy authenticity” (6). In the process of learning how to sound and act like a rudeboy, Jas had to change himself. This change in him is pointed out by Daniel, the boy who Hardjit is beating up at the beginning of the story: “What’s happened to you in the last year? . . . You’ve become one of those gangsta types you used to hate” (13). Despite his continuous efforts to reproduce the behaviour of the rudeboys, Jas keeps saying and doing the wrong things. One example can be found in the same passage where Hardjit is beating up Daniel. Hardjit believes Daniel called him a “Paki,” which is an insult from someone who is not. Jas wants to encourage Hardjit and he makes a comment on how to spell the word “Paki”: “Yeh, motherfucker, an even when you allowed to call someone a Paki, it be Paki wid a capital P, innit” (7). This is not received well by Hardjit who tells him that he does not need him to teach a spelling lesson (7). Jas tries again to get the language right in another remark:

To make up for my useless shitness I decided to offer the followin carefully crafted comment: — Yeh, bredren, knock his fuckin teeth out. Bruck his fuckin 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 saying, Kill the pig, like the kids do in that film *Lord a the Flies*. It's also a book too, but I'm tryin to stop knowin shit like that. (9)

Jas's remark seems to be approved by the rudeboys who include him in the group: "U hear wot ma bredren Jas b chattin? Hardjit says, welcoming my input" (9). This is one of many examples that shows the efforts that Jas has to make to be included in the group, and also the mistakes that he makes.

Not only does Jas not say what a rudeboy is supposed to say, or act like he is expected to, but he also does not think like a rudeboy. This can be seen in the passage cited above, where his reference to *Lord of the Flies* shows what he really thinks about the situation. What Jas says and what he thinks are completely different things (Slåttum 65). He does not fully agree with what his friends are doing, and he compares the beating to a violent scene of execution. The reference that Jas makes also has the effect of revealing his intelligence (Slåttum 65), *Lord of the Flies* being a novel which the other rudeboys have probably never heard of or would not think of in this situation. In fact, Jas used to be quite a good student before joining the group of the rudeboys. This can be seen from the passage where the rudeboys are in the office of Mr Ashwood. There are certificates hanging on the wall with the results of his best students, among which is Jas's certificate:

Five photo-copied GCSE History certificates to be precise. One belonged to some guy called Daniel Stone, the others to people called Jeff Gilliam, Leroy Fraser, Sanjay Varma an then me. All five certificates had got one thing in common: their grade. I din't get an E or a D in GCSE History, you see. I got me a muthafuckin A class, innit. (132–33)

However, despite the fact he does his best to hide his past self, Jas keeps slipping up. This can be seen from his struggle not to say what he thinks and to speak like a proper rudeboy. One example is when he talks about how the plot of Bollywood movies always revolves around the concept of pride and family honour. He mixes vernacular language and rudeboy language in his explanation (Slåttum 66). He explains it like his old self: “Bollywood offers all kinds of important insights into the tragic dysfunctionalities of social cultural structures when people confuse the concept of pride with the concept of honour” (250). At the same time, he also thinks like a rudeboy: “Bollywood films say all kinds a important shit bout how fucked up things can get if you get too hung up bout your pride an your izzat an shit” (250). Jas is aware of the fact that he does not sound like an authentic rudeboy. This can be seen from his inner reflections about how he tries and fails to say and do the right thing:

I wouldn't be using poncey words like attain an authenticity, innit. I'd be sayin I couldn't keep it real or someshit. An if I said it that way, then there'd be no need for me to say it in the first place so I wouldn't say it anyway. After all, it's all bout what you say an how you say it. Your linguistic

prowess an debating dexterity (though whatever you say don't say it that way). (6)

This is reflected in his use of the language when he talks about himself, and when he talks to others. Jas has “various voices [which] are constantly jostling for position,” (Brouillette 13) with one voice pushing him to act like his old self, using common English, and another voice, in the rudeboy language, telling him to act like a rudeboy:

Every time when it's important to use this gob a mine I hear my voice, which never normly works proply an so I panic . . . Obviously this voice must know that actually it can't speak up, that it can't talk cos it's me, innit, it's my voice. But it keeps tryin anyway. An then another voice, I reckon that makes it three fuckin voices, will go, Boy? (30)

This is the case for example when Samira asks him a question and he does not know how to answer her: “My mind cuts in before I can actually say anything. Things are going well, Jas, it starts sayin to me, so how about just telling her the truth? Fuck off wid dat truth shit, man. Well, I wouldn't talk to me like that if I were you. Remember, Jas, I'm your mind” (253). As such, Jas's inner dialogue also his struggle to adopt the rudeboy lifestyle (Slåttum 67).

Another element that reveals how Jas differs from the rudeboys is that he is not comfortable with using some of the words in the rudeboy language. This can be seen from his explanation of one of the rudeboy rules, rule number four:

According to Hardjit, it don't matter if the proper word for something sounds fuckin ridiculous. If it's the proper word then it's the proper word. Yard is one a them words. If it was me who was the American hip-hop G or whoever the fuck it was who invented all this proper speak, no way the proper word for house'd be a yard. That's the garden for fuck's sake. I in't feeling the word crib either cos that's what American babies sleep in. (45)

Not only does Jas struggle with the use of proper rudeboy language, but he also questions some of the moral aspects of the rudeboys (Slåttum 68). He disagrees with the use of derogatory words for women and homosexuals (46, 57), and he prefers to use non-violent means, even though he wishes he were more violent (108). Jas has difficulty adapting to the rudeboy lifestyle, and reveals himself as a failure both by the mistakes he makes, the language he uses, and the things he questions.

A key element of the story is that Jas's true identity is kept secret from the reader. The fact is that the book plays with stereotypes. The author uses clichés to fool the reader into thinking that Jas is Indian, like his rudeboy friends. At the beginning of the story, it is suggested that Jas is a nickname for Jaswinder, Jaswinder being a common Indian name (24). In the same passage, Jas says that his surname is "fuckin shameful" (24). It is long and difficult, so much so in fact that nobody is able to pronounce it properly (24). He is so ashamed of his surname that he prefers not to share it with the reader (24). At another point in the story, when Samira asks him why he uses the name Jas to make a reservation at a restaurant, he replies: "C'mon, if you had a surname like mine would you give it to people? It's such a long-assed surname an people always pronounce it wrong. You know how it is" (248). Later in the story, heartbroken that Samira broke up with him, Jas imagines his

epitaph: “Here lies Jas. My surname too fuckin long an too fuckin shameful to fit on my own fuckin gravestone” (294). The repetition reinforces the idea that Jas has an Indian name and surname, which ensures that the revelation at the end of the story that Jas is short for Jason (340) and that his surname is Bartholomew-Cliveden (340) remains a surprise. The information that is given about his parents also contributes to the assumption that Jas is of Indian descent. He says that his mother has many different pashmina shawls which she wears all the time, “[even] when she’s gardening” (33). She also cooks food such as chicken biryani with extra chillies (33) and she has threaded eyebrows (332). Jas’s father watches cricket on television (198) and runs a mobile phone business (42), which are activities that the fathers of the other rudeboys also do. Jas also says that their house is watched by their cousins when the family goes on holiday (317). These are all elements which are stereotypically associated with Indian people. Another thing that seems to imply that Jas is Indian is that his hair is said to be so thick that it is impossible to style (28), which is not typical of Western hair types. These speculations and assumptions about his appearance are encouraged by the cover of some editions of the book, which have the picture of what seems to be an Asian-looking boy on it. The way in which Jas talks about his friend group also gives the impression that he is a desi rudeboy: “First we was rudeboys, then we be Indian niggas, then rajamuffins, then raggastanis, Britasians, fuckin Indobrits” (5). He also addresses Daniel, the boy Hardjit is beating up at the beginning of the story, as “the white boy,” (6) which seems to imply that Jas is not white. By doing so, he includes himself in the same category as the rudeboys, and he simultaneously removes himself from the white category.

Not only is Jas described as looking as and presented as being Asian, but he also considers himself as such. From the very beginning, his character is construed in the

reader's mind as being Asian, and this, despite the fact that all of these factors could also very well be attributed to white people. However, they are repeated so often and in a way that is so stereotypical that it is more than enough to imagine and categorise his character as Asian. As a result, the revelation at the end of the story that Jas is "Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden, aged nineteen, white, male," (340) comes as a total surprise. This prompts a second reading, where attention is paid to the smallest details that could, or rather, that do betray Jas's true identity. It is possible to identify several passages which seem innocuous at first, but which become suspicious when rereading the novel. As such, there are various clues that seem to give away that Jas is not who we think he is. Before joining the group of the rudeboys, Jas used to hang out with boys who are called Dave, Gilbert, Spencer (29), and Andy and Mark (146), which are all generic white names. While this does not mean that friendships between people from different cultures or people of different colour are impossible, it is still interesting to see how different his social circle was before he joined the rudeboys. People also point out to him that he resembles Justin Timberlake, a white American pop star, saying that he looks like him (28) and that he dances like him (227).⁴ Samira compares him to Indiana Jones and James Bond, two white actors (102). Although it is unclear whether she is joking with him, it is curious to note that she does not mention Bollywood celebrities instead. In another passage, when the boys talk to Mr Ashwood, he says: "Your idea of diversity seems to be limited to recruiting Jas" (125). Although the diversity which Mr Ashwood refers to could be meant in the sense that Jas used to be a loser, another possibility is that he is talking about the fact that Jas is white. As such, it turns out that Jas's identity was actually hidden in plain sight to the reader all along.

⁴ This comparison is particularly interesting because Justin Timberlake has been accused of cultural appropriation in the past (James).

However, because of all the previous clues that have already constructed Jas's identity as being Indian in the mind of the reader, these facts tend to be glossed over and his identity not to be questioned, thus ensuring that the plot twist remains unexpected until the revelation at the very end of the story.

This leads to the question of cultural appropriation, a notion that is closely linked to passing. This part of the argument is largely based on Pelham's reflections on the topic in her book *Passing: An Alternative History of Identity*, in which she approaches cultural appropriation as a type of passing. In *Passing*, cultural appropriation is regarded as an illegitimate identity performance (Pelham 239). Pelham defines it as a practice "[whereby] members of a historically or currently powerful identity group seek to adopt the culture of a less privileged group" (220). She conceptualises it as a form of reverse-passing, because it is the privileged that pass for the oppressed (Pelham 240), which goes against the traditional understanding of passing. In *Londonstani*, an interesting example in this regard is the fact that Jas wears rakhi bracelets for Diwali, a religious Indian festival (174–75). He explains that "a rakhi is a special thread that your sister ties on your right wrist, meanin you're their brother an you'll always do your duty an protect them, uphold their honour, that kind a thing" (175). The rakhis are tied in August and are meant to be worn until after Diwali in early autumn (175). Jas notices that "Ravi's mum keeps staring at them" (175). He believes that it is because she wonders "[w]hy it is [he] got more rakhis than [her] son" (175). However, considering the fact that Jas is white, another explanation, perhaps more accurate, is that she is looking at him because she does not understand why a white person who is not Indian would wear rakhis. As such, it seems that Jas wearing rakhis can be read as a case of cultural appropriation, as he wears a religious artefact of a less privileged identity group of which he is not part. Ravi's mother is apparently not the only

one to be confused about it because, the previous year, “Hardjit’s [his friend’s] sister tied [Jas] a funky bracelet a beads,” but “nobody else realised it was a rakhi” (176). Instead, “they thought [he]’d become one a them batty boys, the kind who try an look like Peter Andre by wearin beads from Top Man” (176).⁵ The fact that Jas wears rakhis is not only misunderstood, but it is also misinterpreted. While the bracelets are supposed to make Jas’s performance as a rudeboy more convincing, they have the effect of making him appear more feminine. This is ironic, as rudeboys are stereotypically masculine. In other words, his attempt at cultural appropriation completely fails.

Jas is not the only character to be guilty of cultural appropriation. His mother has many different pashmina shawls which she wears around the house all the time (33). In comparison with Jas’s rakhis, she has no knowledge or understanding of the cultural significance of the shawls or, in any case, the question is not addressed. This seems to imply that she sees them solely as fashion accessories, which is a sign of cultural appropriation. That being said, it is important to note that appropriating another culture does not necessarily stem from harmful intentions or attitudes (Pelham 274). In this case, it seems that it arises out of naivety (Pelham 275). In other words, although Jas’s mother is depicted as wearing the scarves as accessories, thus suggesting that she appropriates an element of a culture for fashion purposes, it is safe to say that she most likely has no intention of being offensive or disrespectful towards Indian culture. This issue is addressed at the end of the novel, when Jas’s parents visit him in the hospital and confront him about his behaviour. His father says: “I’ve respected your ways, your youngster’s version of Indian culture. And we both tried. Your mother and I. We tried for your sake to be friends

⁵ Coincidentally, Peter Andre defended Justin Bieber last year against accusations of cultural appropriation for wearing dreadlocks (Hatcher).

with them, to be like them, to get to know them” (340). This way, Jas’s mother appropriation of Indian culture can be explained by the fact that Jas’s parents try to show their support for his rudeboy ways. Regarding Jas, the fact that he explains what the rakhis are for and that he actively participates in the celebration of Diwali like the other rudeboys do shows a certain level of understanding and commitment on his part. He not only wears the bracelets, but also follows the other traditions that come with Diwali, such as learning bhangra dances and cleaning the house (174–75). For this reason, it is tempting to look at Jas’s attitude as appreciation rather than as appropriation. However, as Pelham points out, “there is a fine line between appreciation and appropriation” (280). According to her, “[the people who believe or claim] to be showing respect and admiration for a less privileged culture” in what they think is a token of appreciation, actually perpetrate cultural appropriation, and this because “they are drawing benefit from it” (280). This can be applied to Jas, who benefits from adopting the religious traditions of Indian culture, as it allows him to be accepted and included in the gang of the rudeboys. Even though Jas appears to understand and follow Diwali traditions and customs, he does not actually do it out of respect for Diwali festivities but because he gains acceptance from it. In other words, despite the fact that Jas is presented as being respectful and understanding, his actions and behaviour cannot be separated from his performance of passing, thus making it an act of appropriation and not appreciation.

Another factor to take into account regarding Jas’s use and appropriation of Indian culture is the fact that he does not fully and truly understand its values and customs. Indeed, although Jas is able, to a certain extent, to imitate the rudeboys’ ways, it does not mean that he has a true understanding of what it means to be Indian. The limit of Jas’s comprehension of the values of his rudeboy friends is exemplified by how he addresses

and handles the situation involving Amit's older brother, Arun. Arun is in constant disagreement and conflict with his parents about his upcoming marriage to his fiancée, Reena. For Arun and Amit's mother, in Hindu beliefs, the family of the bride has to show special signs of respect to the groom's family (93). She complains that Reena's family does not treat her with the respect that she expects from them (92). They are supposed to shower her and her family with gifts (91), and call and visit them (92), which she finds they do not do enough. Whenever Arun tries to defend his fiancée and her family, the answer is always the same: "But beita, it's the way things are done, it's the way things are done" (91). His mother insists upon following the traditional cultural practices of a Hindu wedding, which seems trivial and unnecessary to Arun, who has a more Westernised idea of what a wedding is (242). He does not mind that Reena's family does not follow desi wedding traditions as his mother wishes they would (241). At the same time, he does not want to disrespect his family (244) by not honouring traditions (236). When he confides in Jas about it, Jas's advice is that Arun should "[s]tand up for [him]self" and "[b]e a man" (236). He tells Arun that "doing something cos it's tradition, cos it's the way things are done, is the shittiest reason ever to do something" (237), and that "[he] gotta tell [his] parents to see through all those traditions, . . . , so that they can see the truth" (239). Even though, at first, Arun is reluctant to the idea of defying his parents, he ends up confronting them on the matter, and the conversation turns into a violent argument. Arun's mother finds out about Jas's involvement and summons him to their house. When Jas tries to explain himself, she tells him that "[he doesn't] know [their] ways" and that "[he doesn't] understand such things" (261). It is later revealed that Arun, no longer able to handle the pressure, suffers from a mental breakdown and allegedly kills himself by taking an overdose of aspirin (281). Jas ends up being blamed for his death because he is seen as

being responsible for Arun's rebellion and the ensuing confrontation between him and his parents (275). For Jas, this is all "complicated family-related shit" (282), and he does not see why he should be held accountable for Arun's actions and decision (275). While the other rudeboys also disagree with their parents' rigid and arbitrary understanding and respect of traditions, they are careful not to mention it in front of them. Although they openly discuss whether Arun should have chosen an arranged marriage and heavily criticise the trouble that cultural practices cause him (97), they keep their comments for and between themselves. This is because respecting their elders is part of their values (244). This is not the case for Jas, for whom "self-respect" comes before "respect for one's elders". He says: "Respect is one thing, but when people say you should always Respect Your Elders what they're really sayin is you should always agree with them. An how can that not be bullshit?" (244). What can be called "his failure to perform a desi value" (31), as Kiran Kaur Sunar puts it, shows Jas's limited comprehension of Indian culture. Choosing between tradition and love has never been a problem for Jas. Having grown up in a white family, he cannot understand Arun's struggle as he has never faced pressure from his parents to respect strict cultural norms. This idea is reinforced by Amit, who tells Jas to "stop tryin to turn [his brother] into a coconut," (263) which seems to imply that Jas's way of thinking is expressive of white culture. Jas has also not been taught the importance of respect in the same way as his friends have, thus preventing him from grasping the implication of standing up to one's parents in Indian culture. As Kasim Husain writes on the topic of Jas's handling of the situation about Arun's marriage: "[Jas] lacks the requisite personal experience that would have taught him that the transgression of such constructions, nevertheless, can result in serious emotional and material consequences" (558). In this way, Jas's inability to relate to Arun's struggle shows the

cultural barrier that exists between him and his rudeboy friends. Reproducing a particular aspect of a culture does not equate complete knowledge and understanding of said culture. Celebrating Diwali “represent[s] a selective sampling of [Indian] culture” (Pelham 274), and Jas’s observance of the traditions does not mean that he grasps the values of the culture, such as the importance of respect and honour.

It could even be argued that Jas’s limited comprehension of the values and beliefs of the rudeboys goes further than that, and could be considered as a lack of respect. This is illustrated by his relationship with Samira. Samira is described as a beautiful girl, however the rudeboys dislike her because of her easy attitude with boys. They find that it is “too easy for her to break other rules an slip into being the way they din’t want any desi sister to be — whether she was Muslim, Sikh or Hindu” (65). The other reason why the rudeboys disapprove of Samira is because she is Muslim, with whom Sikhs and Hindus are in conflict (66). In *Londonstani*, Muslims and non-Muslims are separated. This rivalry between Muslims and non-Muslims is explained by Jas as follows:

[Not only Sikh but] even Hindu kids called on him when they’d got beef to settle. You know how the people a Gotham City’ve got that Bat signal for whenever they need to call Batman? The homeboys a Hounslow an Southall should have two signals for Hardjit: an Om for when Hindus needed him an a Khanda for when Sikhs needed him. He always used to go on bout how Sikhs an Hindus fought side by side in all them wars. Both got beef with Muslims. (81)

Because of this conflict, interreligious and interethnic relationships are not permitted. Jas explains that there is a term for relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, “sisterising”:

Sikh bredren’re always accusing Muslim guys a tryin to convert their Sikh sisters. Seems that they even got a proper word for it: sisterising. Sometimes the Sikh girls’d start cryin, sayin they’d used brainwashing techniques an that. Sometimes this shit even turned out to be true. Sometimes, though, it was just the girl’s way a dumpin some good-looking Muslim guy she’d been seeing without gettin killed by her community for seeing him in the first place. The desi version a waking up the next morning an thinkin, Oh fuck, I best say he raped me. It’s not my fault, he brainwashed me in to his religion. (80)

It is thus understandable that the rudeboys, who are non-Muslim Sikhs and Hindus, choose not to engage with Samira. While Jas is aware that he is breaking the rules of the rudeboys by dating Samira, he still makes the choice to go out with her (Goh 339):

Look, Samira, I know you’re Muslim an I know I in’t Muslim. An I know the other guys’ll kill me an then when they’re finished your older brothers’ll kill me again . . . The thing is, I know I don’t stand a chance with you, but I was wonderin whether you’d mind if I just chat you up anyway so that you’ll agree to go out to dinner with me next Saturday? (149)

He seduces her with the help of Sanjay, who lets him borrow his expensive car and shows him around all the best places in London to impress her. They are eventually found out and Jas is kicked out of the group of the rudeboys (276). Not only is dating Samira without his friends' knowledge disrespectful to their friendship, but it also affects the reputation of the rudeboys and disrupts their phone business operations (277). Jas does not seem to understand the gravity of the situation, and finds it excessive that people say that "[he]'d crossed the line" by dating Samira (277). As Husain points out, Jas's relationship with Samira, similarly as in the episode with Arun, indicates the ease with which Jas criticises and traditions shows "the extent to which his whiteness shields him from the consequences faced by those he influences to think similarly" (558). While Ravi and Amit have fantasies about Samira, it is only because it fits their masculine bravado, but it is not a genuine expression of desire for her (Husain 559). They are aware of "how high the stakes of trespassing the bounds of religious custom are for them" (Husain 559). Jas's relationship with Samira shows his failure to understand and recognise the importance of respecting the rules set by the rudeboys. Even though Jas does not feel concerned by the aspect of religion, the rudeboys still expect him to respect their rules. The fact that Jas chooses to consciously ignore it, putting his status as a rudeboy at risk, can be seen as a sign of the future failure of his passing.

Jas's relationship with Samira illustrates another problem regarding cultural appropriation, which is the fact that white people, who are usually the ones to appropriate cultures that are not their own, are privileged in the sense that they have the choice to present themselves as anything other than white (Pelham 17). In an interview with the *Metro*, Pelham explains that cultural appropriation is a problematic form of passing because "[the] identity performance is a choice by someone who inherently has more

privilege than whoever they are imitating” (Morris). Pelham explains that it can be compared to cherry-picking, whereby “people [select] the elements of a minority heritage or identity to suit their narrative, before whitewashing the rest in order to appeal to a wider audience” (Morris). However, in the case of Jas, even though he has the choice to adopt the identity of the rudeboys (23), it is not an easy thing to achieve, as has been shown above.

Something interesting regarding Jas’s passing is that Malkani’s novel was turned into a movie with the same title (“Uzma Hasan”). Film producer Uzma Hasan and her producing partner Cavan Ash had been working on an adaption of *Londonstani* for ten years before production began two years ago with writer and director Nirpal Bhogal writing the script and directing the movie (“Uzma Hasan”). The world of the movie is the same as the book, with “the characters, the rudeboy speak, the music and the tone which shifts between humour and drama” (“Uzma Hasan”). The movie also has the same themes as the book, “Asian masculinity, boys growing up pre 9/11, pre social media, and trying to find their identity when torn between different cultures and worlds” (“Uzma Hasan”). Like in the book, the story is told through the character of Jas who finds it hard to find his place in the world. He has joined the group of the rudeboys, whose culture he thinks “can protect him and teach him how to be a man” (“Uzma Hasan”). In the movie, Jas finds it hard to be accepted, but unlike the book, his issues of belonging are caused by racism. That is because, unlike in the book, Jas is not a white British boy in the movie, but a young British Asian (“Uzma Hasan”). This means that there is no reveal at the end, as Jas’s identity is known from the beginning of the film.

Although the screen adaptation of the novel defeats Malkani’s goal of “[demonstrating] for people who don’t normally read novels just what the novel can do that video games and DVDs can’t” (“Londonstani Reader’s Guide”), it has the effect of

exposing the limitations of Jas's passing, namely that it is limited to and by the book. Indeed, while his identity can be hidden within the pages of the book, the same cannot be said for the images on the screen, and even in real life for that matter. This points to one of the restrictions of passing, which is that "[identity] is bound by social and legal constraints related to the physical body" (Ginsberg 2). This is linked to an important aspect of passing, which is the visual component of identity (Moriel 171). As Moriel puts it, "we are not only who we are but we are also who we look like" (171). She argues that the way that "we recogni[s]e, categori[s]e and evaluate people" is made "on the basis of visual cues and clues," which is "an important facet of any critical approach to the study of passing" (Moriel 171). The movie adaptation of the novel highlights the fact that, while the patterns of speech and behaviour of the rudeboys are something that Jas can learn and mimic, the same cannot be said for his skin colour and overall general appearance. Even though Jas tries to distance himself as much as possible from who he was before joining the rudeboys by talking and acting like them, it is always compromised by his outward appearance. It is therefore possible to argue that Jas is in fact not passing at all in the book, considering that he might still be perceived as Jason, a white British teenager, and not as Jas, a desi rudeboy.

The reason why Jas joins the group of the rudeboys is because of Hardjit (27). Hardjit comes to his defence after Jas gets humiliated by Davinder at school (27–28). Jas stumbles upon Davinder making out with a girl while looking for a quiet classroom to spend break time (27). He apologises but does not leave straight away, preferring to stay a bit longer to look at the girl who he thinks is beautiful (27). Davinder notices and asks him if he wants to watch, adding that it is the closest that he will get to kiss someone, because no one would ever kiss him (27). Jas does not say anything back, even though he wants to,

and he leaves the classroom (28). That is where he finds Hardjit, who heard everything and tells him that he should stand up for himself (28). After this episode, it is almost like Hardjit takes Jas under his wing. He teaches him the ways of the rudeboy lifestyle. The reason why he does it is unclear. Jas assumes that Hardjit took pity on him: “I reckon he was basically so freaked out by how gimpy I was that he felt he had to cure me” (29). It does not matter to Jas who thinks that “if you hang around with sorted people then other people’ll think you’re safe yourself” (30).

The only reason why the rudeboys accept him in their group, is because Jas behaves like a man and follows the rules, which is more important for them than religion or skin colour. As put by Aysegul Turan, “[Jas’s] identity as a gang member and rudeboy depends on his compliance with the model and his success in performing it” (241). However, as Hisae Komatsu remarks, Jas cannot be a “desi rudeboy” in reality (104). Komatsu suggests that Jas is a “cappuccino,” white outside and brown inside (104). Jas’s passing shows that, even though Jas would normally be considered to be more privileged because of his skin colour and origins, in this case, the roles are reversed. Before joining the rudeboys, Jas was, for lack of a better word, a loser. He says:

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 used to have braces on both my upper an lower teeth, I’d read too many books, I walked like a fool, I had this annoyin habit a sniffin all the time, I couldn’t usually talk proply an even when I did I couldn’t ever say the right thing. Basically I was just generally a khota, like that coconut we’d seen earlier today except I din’t even have my own car. (26)

Jas's motivation to become a rudeboy is that it will allow him to be someone. The rudeboys, and the other groups of boys in Hounslow like them, are recognised and respected at school and in the streets. Becoming a rudeboy means that Jas gains something by leaving his old self behind. Even though it might seem surprising for a white person to choose to associate themselves with the likes of the rudeboys, it is understandable in this case, as it is a way for Jas to escape from his old life. As Sandra van Lente puts it in her dissertation, "he wants to escape his role as a victim and be part of a stronger group. He is looking for protection, something to identify with and for somebody whose lead he can follow" (179). In a way, being a rudeboy means that Jas is no longer a "nobody," but "somebody".

The beating scene in the closing chapters of the book can be interpreted as the collapse of Jas's identities. This interpretation is possible because it is not clearly mentioned who his attackers are. If the three attackers are his former band of rudeboys, then it means that Jas is no longer one of them. If they are Sanjay's cronies, then Jas has failed at being a gangster like Sanjay. Finally, it could be that the people who attack him are Samira's brothers, and then that would mean that he has failed at being her boyfriend. Whether they are his rudeboy friends, Sanjay's henchmen or Samira's brothers, Jas being attacked can be interpreted as the fact that he has failed at being each of the identities that he tried to create for himself. He is no longer a rudeboy, he does not have a girlfriend, and he is not Sanjay's protégé anymore. He has not managed to fit either of the three personas that he has created for himself which is shown by the fact that he is literally beaten by them. This can be interpreted as his ultimate failure as a pretender. Malkani has explained in an interview with James Graham for the *Literary London Journal* that, even though the identity of the three attackers is up to the interpretation of the reader,

he himself believes that they can only be Sanjay's henchmen ("An Interview with Gautam Malkani", quest. 21). If the three attackers are Hardjit, Amit, and Ravi, then it would suggest that no people of different ethnicities can be friends (Graham, "An Interview with Gautam Malkani" quest. 21). If they are Samira's brothers, it would mean that people of different religions cannot be together in a relationship (Graham, "An Interview with Gautam Malkani" quest. 21). For Malkani, they are Sanjay's gangsters, and they serve as a representation of Jas's "wrong turn [] to get seduced by all the materialism and all the bad things about the subculture that Sanjay represents" (Graham, "An Interview with Gautam Malkani" quest. 21). However, it is possible to keep the three interpretations for the identity of the attackers. Indeed, it is not that it is impossible for people from different cultural and religious backgrounds to be together or get along, but rather that it is not possible for someone to be able to fit into all of the identity categories at the same time.

It would be expected that, after the revelation of his true identity, Jas would stop trying to be a rudeboy, and yet he does the opposite. It even seems like he is unable or unwilling to let go of his persona. This can be seen in the last passage of the novel, where Jas flirts with a British Asian nurse:

— Are you still trying to guess where my name is from?

— Hmmmmm, I give it, — Shilpa Mohan? Sounds Indian.

— Well done, she goes, makin sure my water jug is full an then hangin my chart back on the foot a my bed.

— Sounds Punjabi, I go, managing to bring out her dimples again.

Then she walks back round to my bedside table, grabs the jug an pours me a fresh glass a water.

I wanna show her my good manners by sayin Thank you. But Jazzy Jas Man can do better than fuckin Thank you. I shoot her a look an give it, —
Shukriya. (342)

This passage can be interpreted in two ways. Either Jas feels confident enough as a rudeboy that he thinks he can charm the nurse by acting like a rudeboy, or he chooses to ignore the fact that acting like a rudeboy is what brought him in trouble in the first place (Hakkarainen 114). In both interpretations, Jas chooses not to go back to his true identity. This might offer an explanation for why Jas tries to spend as little time as possible with his parents because, even though they try to be accepting and understanding of his rudeboy identity, they still treat him like their son, that is, Jason Cliveden-Bartholomew. This might be an explanation for Jas's complicated relationship with his parents. He does not want to be near them more than he needs to be because they remind him that he is not Jas. This becomes clear in the passages in which he interacts with his parents. He can hardly tolerate being around them, saying that being in their presence gives him nausea. For instance, they have a discussion before he goes out on a date with Samira, and he says that "[he] can't stand being in the same room as [his Mum] even when [he's] fully clothed. Matter a fact [he starts] gettin that nausea feeling again, the one [he] always gets when she's around" (199), and that "seeing [his Dad] makes [him] feel even sicker" (203). One way to understand Jas's unease around his parents is that they serve as a reminder of who he used to be, which he refuses to be. It is not so much that he is trying to avoid them, but rather that he is trying to escape from his old self. Being a rudeboy is his way of being someone. Even though there is no question of survival like with passing, his existence seems to somehow depend on it. Despite the fact it has brought him a lot of trouble,

being a rudeboy is Jas's way of being, and going back to who he was does not seem to be an option for him.

6. Malkani: Passing as Misunderstanding

[T]here's no definitive rudeboy experience.

— James Graham, “An Interview with Gautam Malkani”

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, *Londonstani* is a book which focuses on characters who are not authentically themselves. Interestingly, this issue of authenticity can be extended to the author himself, and can be discussed in the framework of passing. Of particular interest in this regard is the interview between Malkani and Graham for the *Literary London Journal*, in which Malkani says:

I just wanted to do something with my dissertation — it was the only decent thing I did at uni. Initially I tried turning it into an academic text — a kind of urban ethnography. But that was boring to write — you have to keep qualifying stuff, you can't drill down into specific characters and personalities. And fiction was also a better way of putting my dissertation into a form that young people and even Brit Asian rudeboys themselves would be able to engage with. I'm not saying rudeboys read novels, but I thought I'd have a better chance of engaging them with a novel than a textbook — and if you look at the way the book's presence has shaped up on *MySpace* and *Facebook* that seems to be holding true. But it's a hard slog. (“An Interview with Gautam Malkani”, quest. 30)

This passage summarises Malkani's approach to his work. With *Londonstani*, Malkani wanted to make the findings of his dissertation available and attractive to those directly concerned, the community of British Asians; this is how the novel came to be.

While the focus of the novel is inauthenticity, this is not how the story was received and discussed. The issue seems to be twofold: on the one hand, Malkani received negative criticism for giving what was perceived as an inaccurate portrayal of the rudeboys, and on the other hand, his knowledge and authority on the topic as an author was questioned. The criticism that Malkani received was mainly for the style (Master-Stevens 117). The *New York Times*' Sophie Harrison did not mince her words, saying that the novel "[is] shallow about girls. It has an embarrassingly sophomoric twist for a denouement . . . it's annoying, chaotic, overstated" (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117). Similarly, Kamila Shamsie, writing for *The Guardian*, pointed out that the story lacked depth: "[T]he problem with Jas's narration is that too often the slick superficiality of his life becomes the slick superficiality of the novel" (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117). This issue was also raised by Suhayl Saadi in a review for *The Independent* (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117). Christine Thomas's review for the *San Francisco Chronicle* was particularly negative: "The peripheral characters are likewise two-dimensional, practically caricatures, who speak in stiff and unrealistic dialogue. Jas's old teacher, Mr[] Ashwood, appears at a convenient moment to . . . provide Malkani's plot with some depth, but the scene is forced, waylaying the story and boring the reader" (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117). Thomas does not understand "the sudden and unexplained use of the second person, italicisation, and the combination of two times and dates in one scene," arguing that "[i]f the whole novel were a mix of styles, this experimentation would have made sense" (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117). Regarding the plot, Sameer Rahim, writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, points out

that the pace of quickens in the second half of the story, while Saadi finds that “the joints [of the plot] are visible, clunky” (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117). However, all these faults can be attributed to the fact that *Londonstani* was Malkani’s first novel (Master-Stevens 117).

With that being said, Malkani also received a lot of praise for *Londonstani*. Niall Griffith, writing for *The Telegraph*, found that *Londonstani* was a “compelling, impressively sustained, at times skilfully written and structured novel” (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117). In her review for the *Washington Post*, Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum is more balanced in her criticism, stating that “[she wished] that Malkani had trusted himself and his material more,” and that “his writing achieves moments of real verve and power that suggest he doesn’t need all the bluster and flash on which his anxious rudeboys rely” (qtd. in Master-Stevens 117–18). In her review for *The Times*, Christina Koning argued that the many positive reviews of *Londonstani* were justified (qtd. in Master-Stevens 118). Several positive literary reviews published in various newspapers, such as the *Observer*, *The Independent on Sunday*, and the *New Statesman*, figure in the paperback edition (Lente 160). The book was also consecrated by South Asian and British Asian institutions (Lente 160), with positive reviews in *The Times of India* and *Asiana Magazine* (Lente 160). Nihal Arthanayake, DJ and radio/TV presenter for the BBC, said of *Londonstani* that it was (Lente 161n396):

[t]he first true twenty-first century British-Asian novel. Dealing not with dreams of the motherland but the British-Asian suburban experience, told through the eyes and mouths of mummy’s boy rudeboys. *Londonstani* is fast, furious, curious and sobering. (qtd. in Lente 160)

The above mentioned comments raised questions about the Malkani's style. However, others reviewers focused on the authenticity of his work, stating that it was not an accurate account of the rudeboy lifestyle.

Regarding this issue, one of the fiercest criticism came from Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal (Komatsu 105), another British Indian writer whose novel *Tourism* was published in the same year as *Londonstani* (Tomczak 213, 225). He wrote a rather negative review about the book, saying that it was “nearly unreadable,” and that “[it was] a tale of bloodcurdling triviality” (qtd. in Komatsu 105). Dhaliwal's main criticism was the fact that *Londonstani* was viewed widely as being an authentic reflection of the working class despite Malkani's status (Komatsu 105). According to Dhaliwal, “publishers who have only experienced the world through books can't see the wood for the trees; hence there is a market for misrepresentative nonsense like this,” a fact which he argued Malkani cleverly exploited (qtd. in Komatsu 105). Dhaliwal raised the issue of how Malkani, being a university graduate, could not possibly know what rudeboys think, basically saying that a person who is not desi could not write and speak about being desi (Komatsu 105). Malkani responded to this criticism by saying that he would write science fiction for his next work, because “no one [would] question [his] authenticity if [he] wrote about aliens,” so that it would “stop people from saying lazy things about whether it is representative or not” (qtd. in Komatsu 105). In Malkani's view, there is no point in questioning the authenticity of a writer in a novel; being desi and talking about being desi are not the same thing (Komatsu 105).

Malkani also addressed the issue of inauthenticity in his interview with Graham. To defend his point of view, he took the example of Thomas Harris, the author of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), who he said should have been disqualified from writing the

book because he was not an authentic cannibal or serial killer (Graham, “An Interview with Gautam Malkani” quest. 7). He continued by saying that thinking in terms of authenticity like this would mean that there was only one single authentic British Asian experience which could not be shared by someone like him who went to university and worked for a newspaper (Graham, “An Interview with Gautam Malkani” quest. 7). He concluded by saying that it would be impossible to capture all of the different ways in which the people in a community like Hounslow experience life in a book, and that searching for authenticity of this kind was meaningless (Graham, “An Interview with Gautam Malkani” quest. 7). In other words, there is no authentic British Asian identity, so there cannot be a question of whether the representation of British Asian boys is authentic in the book (Lente 161).

In the same interview, Malkani also reminded that the object and purpose of his text was to show that authenticity is a questionable notion, and put forward the idea that identity is creative and performative (Lente 161). In the story, the identity of the rudeboys is “about performance and pretence” (Graham, “An Interview with Gautam Malkani” quest. 8). They are defined by their “differing levels of inauthenticity” (Graham, “An Interview with Gautam Malkani” quest. 8). In this way, the issue that Malkani deals with in *Londonstani* is not authenticity, but rather inauthenticity (Liao 47). This is reflected in the rudeboys, who are “a group of boys who pretend to be gangsters living in a ghetto, whereas in fact they are mommy’s boys and live in five-bedroom houses” (Liao 47). As such, instead of “trying to define the cultural identity of the desi rudeboys,” *Londonstani* can be read as “[an illustration of] the multifaceted nature of contemporary identity” (Liao 47).

The book got a lot of attention at the time of its release, to the surprise of Malkani. He received a considerable advance of about £380,000 for the book, which was more than

the amount given to Zadie Smith for *White Teeth*, with which it was compared at the time (Flood). Despite the publisher's high expectations, its release by *Fourth Estate* ended in a commercial failure, with only 15,000 copies sold in the first two years (Flood). Writing for *The Guardian*, Alison Flood suggests that the book was victim to "book fair buzz," a situation in which "[t]he heady atmosphere means publishers can stir each other up with excitement over something that on a dreary day in the office wouldn't merit a second glance". Flood notes that *Londonstani*'s high advance and poor sales results has even been dubbed the "Londonstani effect" by some insiders of the publishing industry. Following this failure, publishers *Harper Perennial* launched "a renewed digital campaign and carefully positioned advertising in *Time Out*, *The Times* and *The Guardian Guide*" in an attempt to keep interest in the book alive (Graham, "'This In't Good Will Hunting'"). They also designed "a vivid new cover, resplendent in new-rave, day-glo green," which featured "a cool-looking Asian youth" and "a recognisably iconic 'London' skyline" (Graham, "'This In't Good Will Hunting'"). This rebranding was intended to appeal to "a younger urban audience" of British Asian subcultures, such as depicted in the book (Graham, "'This In't Good Will Hunting'"). However, these efforts to revive *Londonstani*'s were unsuccessful; the digital campaign also failed, ultimately signifying the commercial failure of *Londonstani* (Shaw 59).

The problem regarding the promotion of *Londonstani* is that it was widely advertised as the next "great multicultural novel" because of its unusual discussion of cultural relations and its exploration of the dynamics of the British Asian community (Shaw 59). It was then put together in the same category as Zadie Smith for *White Teeth* and Monica Ali for *Brick Lane*. The comparison had the effect of giving the impression that the novel was part of the same multicultural literary movement, which was gaining

popularity at the time. Malkani's novel came out when Smith's *White Teeth* launched what can be called a "'marketing multiculturalism' debate" (Graham, "'This In't Good Will Hunting'"). Smith's novel is a work about multiculturalism, and was praised for "encapsulat[ing] the emergence of a properly multicultural society" (Graham, "'This In't Good Will Hunting'"). Smith became a reference on how to portray minority communities in multicultural fiction:

Smith has found a way of harnessing the novel's capacity to embrace heterogeneity, and has used it to give convincing shape to her presentation of an evolving, and genuinely multicultural Britain . . . [Yet] *White Teeth* does not avoid the fact of ethnic tension but, in its self-conscious mode of end-of-millennium tour de force, it presents the social problems of ethnicity as the shared problems of a diverse citizenship with a common home. (Head 107–108, qtd. in Graham "'This In't Good Will Hunting'").

In *White Teeth*, with its "largely optimistic view of multiculturalism," (Squires 180, qtd. in Graham "'This In't Good Will Hunting'") Smith set a precedent for multicultural novels. As *Londonstani* also dealt with the topic of a minority subculture in Britain, it was expected that it would be as ingenious and innovative in its narration.

However, as Makani explained in an interview with Blake Brandes for *Wasafiri*, he had had no intention of making *Londonstani* what it became once it was released, and that he did not have the high expectations that people in the publishing industry had (17). He said that he wrote the book for himself, thinking that this is the kind of book that would have made the life of his sixteen-year-old self easier (Brandes 17). He thought that writing

the book would also be a good way to connect with the people he wrote about, not only the characters in his novel, but also the young people he interviewed for his university dissertation (Brandes 17). For Malkani, the marketing of the book distorted the message of the story, because it was promoted it as “a ‘state of the nation’ critique of multiculturalism” (Brandes 17), while it was not what he had set out to do. *Londonstani* was simply a way for Malkani to use all the research he had done in a way that was not only an accurate but also entertaining so that people who would normally not pick a book would be interested in reading it (Brandes 17). His ambition was not to write “the kind of book that would take the literary world by storm,” and he never imagined that he could be placed “in the same class as the likes of Zadie Smith and Monica Ali” (Brandes 17). For Malkani, this is clear from the very first pages of the book, with “the vernacular and the swearing and violence” (Brandes 17). Although he was flattered that his work was compared with those of Smith and Ali, Malkani did not mean to. Instead, he claims that he was inspired by S.E. Hinton, the author of *The Outsiders* (1967) and *Rumblefish* (1975), when writing *Londonstani* (Brandes 17).

As suggested by Malkani, one possible explanation for the reception and discussion of the novel is its marketing, more specifically the focus that was put on the origins and background of the author for the commercialisation of the novel (Shaw 59). Brouillette gives as example how the publisher of the American edition of the book put a praise from the *Observer* for *Londonstani* on the cover: “bold debut, brimming with energy and authenticity” (7). In her opinion, this is a misleading quote, as the novel is about inauthenticity (Brouillette 7). Brouillette argues that, although it makes sense to put forward the question of the authenticity of the author for commercial purposes, it is not the case for the analysis and discussion of the novel (7). In his article, Graham cites Robert

McCrum, long-term literary editor at the *Observer*, who argues that the poor sales of *Londonstani* are due to the fact that the novel was presented to the wrong audience (“‘This In’t Good Will Hunting’”). McCrum argues that the publisher was “hungry to cash in on the *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane* market,” while *Londonstani* was directed to a younger reading public (qtd. in Graham, “‘This In’t Good Will Hunting’”). For McCrum “[i]f it had been published, as its author once intended, as a teen novel, it might have found a secure place as a contemporary classroom cult” (qtd. in Graham, “‘This In’t Good Will Hunting’”). Graham is more nuanced in his discussion of *Londonstani*’s marketing (Lente 160). In his opinion, it is “the novel’s take on identities and unusual mixing and matching” that made *Londonstani* unpopular as a teen novel, rather than its mis-marketing: “The problem, rather, is that it is literary and explores multicultural society in a style that, whilst being endorsed by reviewers, does not appear to have matched the prevailing taste of its audience” (Graham, “‘This In’t Good Will Hunting’”). While it is true that Jas’s story, and the style in which it was written, might not have been appropriate for “a mass audience that enjoyed the feel-good formula that worked so well for some bestsellers of the past” (Lente 160), the focus on authenticity, rather than inauthenticity during the marketing process, certainly did not help the reception and the sales.

However, despite this failure, this does not mean that *Londonstani* should be put aside. According to Tomczak, the study of contemporary novels like *Londonstani* offers “[a] wealth of benefits” as teaching material for students, because it deals with the problems that many young people face, “their search for identity, generational conflict, the speed of life in a busy metropolis and an attempt to escape label[ing] in a multicultural society” (210). For this reason, Tomczak suggests that novels such as *Londonstani* should be integrated into programmes of education, by using the narrative texts as teaching

materials (210). If used in the classroom context, the novel can be a useful and insightful source of knowledge about not only the rudeboy scene, but also give an illustration of an ingenious use of the English language (Tomczak 210). In addition, it can also be used as the basis material for reflections on the questions of assimilation and integration, and be used to entertain discussions about “issues of cultural difference, urban street behaviour and teenage bonding mechanisms” (Tomczak 210–11). By raising students’ cultural awareness, *Londonstani* opens the discussion on stereotyping and invites reflection on issues encountered by young people (Tomczak 211).

Another point that was raised by Malkani during interviews is how he struggled to transform the information collected for his dissertation into another type of work. He explained to Graham that “*Londonstani* would not have been possible without Jas’[s] voice” (“An Interview with Gautam Malkani”, quest. 36). This seems to indicate that it is possible to consider that character and author are one and the same, acting as a voice for each other. The role of Jas as the narrator has been widely discussed in scholarly articles and in literary reviews. For instance, in his review of the book, Nathan Whitlock, writing for the *Toronto Star*, argues that “[h]aving a narrator like Jas is a bit of a cheat for Malkani,” because it means that “he never really has to depict the thought process of someone like Hardjit from within” (2). In Whitlock’s opinion, this choice allows Malkani to include “lengthy, anthropological asides” because “[h]e employs a narrator for whom [the world of the rudeboys] is slightly alien” (2). Whitlock observes that the story is repeatedly interrupted by “Jas [who] makes sure [that] the reader is brought up to speed on all things Hounslow” (2). For Whitlock, “Jas thus gets to stand in for the reader and act as generous host at the same time, always making sure that we know exactly where everyone is and why they are doing what they’re doing” (2). While it is true that Jas can be

considered as a substitute and as a guide for the reader, it is possible to suggest another interpretation of his character, namely that Jas acts as a kind of surrogate figure for Malkani.

This is pointed out by Brouillette in her analysis in which she states that it is possible to consider that Jas is “a clear, though unacknowledged, figure for Malkani, a quasi-anthropological outsider perched between conflicting modes of self-presentation and lionized for the self-reflexivity that he alone possesses” (11). She adds that Jas is “an almost anthropological outsider stuck between conflicting self-presentational ideologies and is admired for his unusual capacity for self-reflection” (11). Similarly, Van Lente mentions in her dissertation that “Malkani himself (even if involuntarily) encourages the idea of the novel being an insider’s work about something called desi rudeboy subculture” (162). According to her, this is caused by his many comments about his training as a sociologist, and also because of his repeated mentions that the novel started as a scientific research for his university thesis (Lente 162).

This idea of the story being the work of an anthropologist is also found in *Discourses of Postcolonialism in Contemporary British Children’s Literature* by Blanka Grzegorzcyk (2015), in which Grzegorzcyk observes that the story reads more as a series of adventures than as a plot (Snell, 178). Grzegorzcyk suggests that Malkani’s novel can be read as “an autoethnography as Jas approaches rudeboy culture with the attitude of an anthropologist” (Grzegorzcyk 48, qtd. in Snell 178). According to Grzegorzcyk, Malkani’s writing of Jas’s performance as a rudeboy, whether intentional or not, echoes colonial tropes of passing (48). Grzegorzcyk even argues that Malkani’s borrowing of autoethnographic conventions connects Jas to histories of passing during colonialism (48). She cites the anthropologist Walter Dyk, who tried to pass as an American Indian to collect

ethnographic data, and also the explorer Richard Burton, who disguised himself as an Indian to facilitate the building of the British Empire (Grzegorzczuk 48).

In this way, it is possible to argue that Jas acts as a passing figure for Malkani who uses him to voice his views and analysis on the rudeboy culture. Brouillette likens Jas's friendship with the rudeboys to Malkani's relationship with the people he interviewed to write his dissertation (11). Like Malkani did for his dissertation, Jas takes notes and gives comments on the rudeboys in the novel. Even though Jas's character is not meant to be interpreted as Malkani in the novel, they are both observers and interpreters of the rudeboys.

One of the most obvious manifestations of Jas's status as an observer are the "rudeboy rules" that he established in order to be able to behave like a rudeboy (Lente 180; Master-Stevens 133). The rules are based on Hardjit's comments and orders, but they are formulated by Jas (Lente 166, 180; Master-Stevens 134). There are seven rudeboy rules, including how to lie (39), how to speak (45), and how (not) to dress (60) like a rudeboy. What follows is an example of a rudeboy rule:

Rudeboy Rule #7:

It's Basic Bollywood for Beginners. In situations that involve defending or rescuing a fit lady, you can stand tall with your front intact even if all your crew walk out on you or try to thapparh you. They call it being a hero. An when a lady's got your hormones bubbling like two different types a toilet cleaner mixed together in a jacuzzi, you got no choice but to be a hero. (61)

The rules are listed by number in the book in the order in which they are mentioned (Master-Stevens 134). They are preceded by headings in bold italics, which sets them apart from the rest of the text (Master-Stevens 134). The format and the content of the rudeboy rules make it look as if Jas is taking notes and compiling them for a sort of textbook on learning how to be a rudeboy (Master-Stevens 134). The rules constitute a body of information for reference purposes, which are meant as a way for Jas to improve his rudeboy performance (Lente 180; Master-Stevens 134). As such, it is possible to argue that the way in which Jas goes about observing and describing the behaviour and speech of the rudeboys, to then turn what he sees and hears into rules, is similar to the way in which an anthropologist would study the rudeboy culture.

For the discussion of Malkani's passing, it is interesting to consider Caughie's reflections on passing in *Passing and Pedagogy: The Dynamics of Responsibility*. Caughie makes a distinction between two forms of passing, metaphorical and literal passing (21). She argues that passing can be used in the metaphorical sense when it is used with the operative "as," in the sense of "passing as" (21). When used as "passing as," passing refers to "a variety of situations where one impersonates or represents another, speaking 'as' or 'for' a class of people" (Caughie 21). The person is not actively trying to pass for another group of people, but is talking as if they were part of that group. This presents ethical problems, namely whether the person speaking "as" or "for" said people knows enough to be speaking about them, and if so, in what terms and to what extent they can (Caughie 21). Whether passing is used metaphorically or non-metaphorically, the passer has to become the identity that he or she is trying to impersonate, either for himself or herself, or for others (Caughie 21). Literally and metaphorically, there is a risk. In the non-metaphorical sense, the passer runs the risk of his real identity being exposed, and in the metaphoric

sense, there is a risk that the passer will slip up and let the true nature of his impersonation shine through his performance (Caughie 21). One example of the non-metaphorical use of passing is the case of a teacher talking about a subject with which he or she has no direct personal experience. For instance, a climate activist in Europe could give a presentation on the damages of deforestation in the Amazon and the consequences for the local population, while his knowledge is limited to theory. This means that the person talking about the subject has to represent the people in question, thus speaking “as” or “for” them, as if they were affected by the damages of deforestation.

Caughie talks about the “metaphor of tourism,” which she associates with “a certain intellectual experience of estrangement,” and also “a sense of entitlement” (71). The question is then whether or not the person passing is qualified or experienced enough to be talking about a topic which he or she has limited or no relation to (Caughie 124). Caughie’s interpretation of passing could be applied to Malkani: Malkani is passing through Jas, in the sense that he acts as a scholar (Caughie 124). He is like a teacher in a classroom, displaying knowledge that is not his own. He is speaking for the rudeboys, through Jas, and not passing himself as a rudeboy. This point is also raised by Brouillette, who argues that Malkani created a distance by making the rudeboys, a community he is not attached to, “the topic of his intellectual property, in the form first of academic research and then of fiction” (11). For the writing of his dissertation and novel, Malkani had “to assume the role of an apprentice anthropologist, which required him to transcend one ‘voice’ in order to gain the authority to speak about the precise milieu [of the rudeboys]” (Brouillette 11). The problem in this case is that Malkani has never really belonged to the community of the rudeboys. In an interview featured on the website *Penguin Random House*, Malkani was asked about his relation to the rudeboy scene

(“Londonstani Reader’s Guide”). He explained that he had always been obsessed with understanding the rudeboy scene (Malkani, “Londonstani Reader’s Guide”). His interest stemmed from the fact that, when he was growing up, many of his Asian school friends decided to distance themselves from 1980s stereotypes about British Asian boys being “untroubling, conscientious, somewhat subservient, and extremely studious” (Malkani, “Londonstani Reader’s Guide”). He was bothered by the rejection of the latter, having the feeling that they were doing themselves a disservice by trying to prove that they were tough and virile. His teenage angst prompted his thesis about the rudeboy scene and he interviewed many of his friends for his study. Malkani added that, even though he was not part of the rudeboy scene, he considered himself to be close to the desi subculture because he liked the music (“Londonstani Reader’s Guide”). This means that, as the author, Malkani had to “assume the authority to arrive at his act of representation [of the rudeboys]” (Brouillette 11). In this perspective, it can be argued that Malkani acts as a metaphorical passing figure, as he is speaking “as” a rudeboy in his novel, although he himself is not a rudeboy.

This argument was also raised by Brouillette, for whom Malkani should not be interpreted as a straightforward representation of the community of the rudeboys, despite the fact that Malkani can be considered as a spokesperson for it (7). Brouillette points out that *Londonstani* is a work of literary fiction (8). Even though the book is based on the findings of Malkani’s Cambridge degree study, the text that is presented to the reader is not meant to be understood as an anthropological study of the rudeboy scene. Malkani’s case highlights the fact that passing comes with the risk of being accused of being inauthentic. In this case, the inauthenticity is related to the knowledge that the author

has of the topic. Considering that *Londonstani* is a work of fiction, it does not make sense to interpret it as an authentic depiction of the rudeboy experience.

Although the question of the authenticity of Malkani's authenticity and passing remains open, one element appears to be clear: these are not the reasons why Malkani wrote the novel. The whole debate relies on a misunderstanding.

7. Conclusion

Face the facts of being what you are, for that is what changes what you are.

— Søren Kierkegaard

This dissertation relies on the assumption that there are at least three phenomena of passing in *Londonstani*: the rudeboys, the main character and the author. In this final section, I will go over how they can be interpreted as passing and provide an analysis on how they are both similar and different at the same time.

Although the teenagers described in the novel use the label “rudeboy,” they have created their own version of the “desi rudeboy”. Still, they do not manage to be convincing rudeboys: every time they try to act as such, it is possible to find elements that show that they are pretending. It is particularly illustrated by their interactions with their mothers: whenever the rudeboys are in their presence, or even if their mothers are mentioned, they go back to being the children that they are. Likewise, the attention that they pay to the main aspect of their identity, their masculinity, and their efforts to enhance it, is pushed to such an extent that it has the opposite effect of making them look feminine. In the same spirit, Hounslow, the place where they live, cannot be considered as the ghetto that they claim to come from, considering that their parents have good situations which are not the ones you would expect for street gangsters. In addition, the language that they have constructed to complete their self-made identity can only be used in the streets; they avoid to use it with their parents.

All of this gives the overall feeling that they are playing a role that they can act out or not, depending on the situation. When analysing their behaviour, it may be useful to

remember why they developed such an attitude: they are trying to pass as rudeboys in order to resist assimilation into British society, unlike their parents. The question is whether this can be interpreted as passing at all: is it passing, or only performance? My interpretation is that it can be considered as a minor form of passing, as the rudeboys are only pretending to be gangsters from the ghetto and not teenagers from middle-class families. In my understanding, the rudeboys are trying to pass themselves off as desi gangsters in order not to pass as British Asian boys.

One difference between Jas and the rudeboys is that, while the rudeboys think they that are being authentically themselves, Jas is aware of his inadequacy and consistently reflects on it. For example, he feels as if he is battling with several voices which tell him what he should do and critic him when he makes a mistake. Jas continuously attempts to fit in with the rudeboys by adopting their manners of speech and behaviour. In order to achieve this, he had to completely change himself. Jas is very cautious with what he says and how he says it. Despite his best efforts, Jas does not manage to successfully pass as a rudeboy.

It is assumed that Jas is only inadequate in the sense that he is not as much of a rudeboy as the other boys of the group, but this changes once it is revealed at the end of the story that he is a white British teenager called Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden. Jas's identity thus comes with a certain degree of secrecy, which is typical of passing. That being said, while Jas's identity is kept secret from the reader, it is not the case of the other characters of the novel who know all along who he really is. He is only fooling the reader, but that stops at the end when his identity is revealed. In other words, his passing only exists for the reader, but not in the novel.

Jas's passing is peculiar, in the sense that he is a white person pretending to be a brown person. This can be interpreted as a form of cultural appropriation, or as Pelham suggests, reverse passing. The reason why Jas adopts the identity of the rudeboys comes from the fact that he does not like who he is. Before joining the gang, Jas considered himself as a "loser," so pretending to be one gives him the opportunity to be "cool," or more, to "be".

Jas's character can be interpreted as an alter ego for Malkani in the story. Jas acts as a guiding figure in the book. Like Malkani, he has the status of an anthropologist who observes and describes the rudeboys. In this way, it can be said that Malkani is passing in the book through the medium of Jas who acts as his voice in the narration. With that being said, it is important to mention that Malkani has never claimed to identify as a rudeboy, and has not written the story from the point of view of a rudeboy. He only said that he was interested in learning about the rudeboy community. Unlike traditional accounts of passing, there is no secret about who he is; he does not hide his identity behind a character. Instead, it can be linked to Caughie's interpretation of passing, with Malkani acting as a scholar who speaks for the rudeboys through Jas.

One of the most common criticisms made regarding Malkani's story about the rudeboys is that he could not know what it is to be a rudeboy as he is not one of them. Malkani defended himself by saying that his book was not meant to be read as an authentic account of rudeboy life. On the contrary, it is about how identities are inauthentic in general. People who criticised his book saying that it is not authentic did not understand that it was about inauthenticity. As Malkani argues, anybody can write about anything, regardless of direct personal experience with the topic, which in my opinion can be applied to *Londonstani*, considering that it is not a work of documentation, but a work of fiction.

The criticism that Malkani received for *Londonstani* can be attributed to the fact that the promotion of the book made it out to be something else than Malkani intended it to be in the first place, that is, as a fun book for teenagers to read and enjoy. The book was put together with other works focusing on positive multiculturalism. Considering the humour and the language in *Londonstani*, it was perhaps too much fun to be taken as seriously as people made it out or wanted it to be.

In conclusion, with *Londonstani*, Malkani depicts three phenomena of passing. They are similar in the sense that they depict someone or something portrayed as someone or something that they are not. However, they are different in the sense that, as they are expressed and performed diversely, they achieve different kinds of passing. In the case of the rudeboys, they attempt to escape assimilation by pretending to be gangsters, but there are constant reminders that they are actually mamas' boys still living at home. Jas wants to be a rudeboy to be someone, but he is only successful at convincing the reader that he is passing because his true identity is kept hidden. With Malkani, although he never claimed to be a rudeboy and did not intend to write a book about multiculturalism, he was perceived and analysed as such.

One might ask why write a dissertation on the topic of passing. The reason for that is that passing is relevant as ever nowadays with the emergence of social media. Although the motivations for passing have changed over the years, people still try to pass as someone else, whether in real life or online. We live at a time where pretending to be someone else is still more pervasive. For example, people can edit their pictures on the internet to the point where they can make themselves look like someone else. Someone could have two separate identities: one in real life, and one in virtual life where there is no limits to who they can be.

The limitations of my work are that I focused on one book, one community, at one point in time. My study of passing is thus restricted to only this one work. If I had had more time, I would have extended my research to another book on the same topic. Based on what I have said in my work, this could be a potential start for further research, a comparison of passing in *Londonstani* and passing in another work, perhaps one dealing with identities in virtual reality, such as Malkani's second novel, *Distortion*, for example.

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