Gautam Malkani’s first novel Londonstani (2006) revolves around the story of Jas, the narrator, who has recently joined a gang formed by three teenage boys of South Asian origin. The novel, on the whole, depicts the problematic transition from boyhood to manhood within the multicultural framework of Britain. Although the story focuses on the gang, it also presents a broader perspective about ethnic diversity and its consequences, especially in experiences in daily life. That the characters live in a highly multicultural environment complicates the process of self-definition and foregrounds the difficulty of establishing one’s identity on solid grounds in the midst of several competing factors. Several elements such as cultural background, religion, and socio-economic status appear as external sources of both stress and comfort for them. As the novel portrays their attempts to establish their identity, language and gender, greatly influenced by the external factors just mentioned, emerge as the main constituents of this process. The performative aspect of both language and gender plays an influential role in the formation and transformation of the main characters’ identities. Indeed, the novel puts special emphasis upon Jas’ self-conscious attempts to re-define his identity in accordance with the model imposed upon him. This essay aims to look at how the performative aspect of gender and language emerges as the driving force behind identity formation process and its significance within the context of the novel.

Gautam Malkani’s first novel Londonstani (2006) revolves around the lives of four teenage boys living in the suburbs of London. The novel depicts a problematic transition from boyhood to manhood in the multicultural environment of Britain. Although the story focuses on the group formed by these four boys, it also presents a broader perspective about ethnic diversity and its consequences, especially in daily life experiences. It foregrounds the importance and difficulty of establishing one’s identity on solid grounds. That the characters live in a highly multicultural environment complicates the process of self-definition. Several factors such as cultural background, religion, and socio-economic status appear as external sources of both stress and comfort for them. The notion of performance emerges as the most crucial element in their establishment of an identity. I argue that the performative aspect of language and gender, greatly influenced by the external factors I have
indicated, emerges as the driving force behind the identity formation and transformation in the novel.

Jas, the narrator of *Londonstani*, recounts his life within the framework of the gang. Led by Hardjit, a Sikh, the group consists of Amit and Ravi, both Hindus, along with Jas, whose religious affiliation is never revealed. As a newcomer, Jas experiences the difficulty of proving himself as a real member of the group. The whole novel centres on Jas’ attempts to create a strong sense of attachment to the group through which he can establish his own identity. As a first-person narrator, he discloses the difficulties of forming this “rudeboy identity”, which necessitates a certain number of performative acts. In order to gain full acceptance to the group, he has to prove himself in two important areas, namely his use of language and his masculinity. Thus, issues of language and gender emerge as the main points to understand how not only Jas but the whole group choose to define themselves.

Before moving into a closer examination of Jas’ position in the novel, it is highly beneficial to look at the use of language in the overall narrative. The language of the novel strikes the reader from the very beginning as it opens with an exclamation by Hardjit: “Serve him right he got his muthafuckin face fuck’d, shudn’t be callin me a Paki, innit …. Shudn’t b callin us Pakis, innit, u dirrty gora.”¹ This instance exemplifies not only the highly colloquial use of English that permeates the whole novel but also the non-English words used. The novel presents an unconventional use of English, which sometimes makes the reader uncomfortable due to his unfamiliarity with the language spoken by the characters.² The novel embodies a unique mixture of different languages and abbreviations. In an interview, Malkani describes the language used in the novel as “basically a mash-up of London street slang; popular Americanisms (such as “feds” or “bucks”); Panjabi slang and hip-hop slang”. The constituents of this mixture point to different factors present in the characters’ lives and also competing with each other. The subculture presented in the novel is closely associated with these factors on different levels. Growing up in London as teenagers, the characters are already familiar with the street slang, yet this is not sufficient for them to underline their ethnic backgrounds. Whereas London slang by itself can

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² It is noteworthy that the American edition of the novel is accompanied by a glossary that explains the key words used by the characters in the novel.