

## One night riding a tube in London

“The whole idea of a stereotype is to simplify. Instead of going through the problem of all this great diversity – that it’s this or maybe that – you have just one large statement; It is this.”  
Chinua Achebe (Nigerian novelist)

11:45 pm at London underground riding home from Covent Garden to Liverpool station. There is countless number of people rushing to catch the last train to ride to their destination. While sitting on a tube and being impatient to get to my station I started doing what people do when they want to kill time. I started off by blocking my mind with useless thoughts. Finally I end up looking around at people and analyzing them; paying attention to what they look like and trying to guess what they are thinking of. Does their appearance tell much about what they actually are?

This Pakistani guy in front of me who looks very conservative and angry, does his facade really exhibit his inner world? As a person from Azerbaijan, which is also a Muslim country, however, as someone who doesn’t know much about Islam, do I think I can roughly read his mind? Let’s give it a try. Most probably, in his mind he deeply disapproves of and judges people around him who are mostly drunk. That’s the first thought that comes to my mind and probably to other people’s thoughts when they see a young Pakistani man with a long beard and a very traditional appearance, which looks around suspiciously (?) (How ironic...). Or maybe he is just an ordinary man who can’t wait to get home to his family and/or friends or even to get to his bed after a long day of exhausting work. Perhaps, he doesn’t even bother to care about his surroundings...

What about the middle-aged couple sitting in front of me? I see a man with bleached hair and a woman with short fringe, wearing very plain, unattractive clothing. Normally we would have a very ludicrous prejudice about these people which would assert that these people are riding to their poor flat, living a boring life with their big dirty dog which heavily stinks. However, when I look deep into her eyes I can catch a glimpse of sadness in her eyes. She gazes at her husband (which could be her boyfriend) with a melancholy, which delivers a story behind them. Could it be their last night together? Could she not be married to this guy while seeing him secretly without her actual husband knowing about it? Could she actually be married to this guy and their child was in a hospital with a serious disease?

There can be tons of stereotypes constructed and never-ending stories made up about all kinds of people in here...About the man sitting next to me, wearing ear plugs, and playing PSP Tennis. About this lonely woman who has cottons in her ears, who looks tired and hopeless...About this white guy with the suitcase; what could be ahead of him? About the black woman with huge Afro...About the musicians playing an amazing music at the exit of the tube...And even about this young couple who seem so much in love...I choose to leave it all to your imagination.

Everyone is rushing somewhere. Some of these people are impatient to get home, because their parents, spouses, children are waiting for them. Some of them don’t have anyone to wait for them. They are just tired after a long day and are impatient to get home, take off their shoes, and fall asleep on a warm bed. Others may have late hours at work. And probably some of them are just pretending to rush in order to be the part of the crowd...

Finally I am out on the street. People seem happier here. No more rush, no more anxiety.

Our first impressions about others are usually constructed according to number of different factors. These factors include social class, intellectual level, religion, race, ethnicity, sex, gender stereotypes, the clothing, the behaviour displayed at that same moment we meet them, and etc. We use stereotyping in almost all aspects of our lives: at work, at home, and elsewhere. Despite of showing so much narrow-mindedness in our everyday lives, we consider ourselves to be very liberal and open-minded people. Do we even make an effort to look deeper into people's lives without preconceptions, while showing more empathy and understanding? Are we all being shallow by overlooking everything humane and by being intolerant towards people we don't know? Or is just me?

Ulker Isayeva.