

Criticism of Identity Fetishism in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to unravel how Hanif Kureishi's novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), reflects issues related to immigration after the upheavals of the 1960s and the wave of independence in what were once the colonized lands and territories of the British Empire. The article shows how the novel succeeds in raising the thorny questions of identity and imagined native homelands as they are well-known today. The latter questions also result in scenes of identity fetishism and strict-mindedness that the novel openly challenges. Through the use of satire, Kureishi exposes the dangers of exclusive identity and strict clinging to one's homeland and heritage in a globalized, metropolitan space of London. The novel is also critical of the legacies of Orientalism, an ideology and a prism that views 'Others' as backward, uncivilised and threat to a deemed pure identity. The article also stresses that questions of immigration and immigrants will remain an enduring concern for coming decades in metropolitan spaces and contexts. This attests to the fact that novels are not simply works of pure imagination without any reflection of actual problems and phenomena.

Keywords- criticism, identity fetishism, Kureishi, immigrants, cultural heritage, satire.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is quite a hard task to bring up the intertwined issues of exile, migration, wandering, minor position and post-colonialism in one piece of work. Besides, there are also identity, ambivalence, and hybridity: the three terms that capture the *zeitgeist* of our actual age. Moreover, displacement, 'uprootedness,' and partial identities and their formation depict the everyday realities of postcolonial times, spaces and peoples. However, the main compelling and challenging objective for which this essay is set is the study of how exilic voices, Hanif Kureishi's protagonists and himself in the first place, reveal different views when reflecting on issues of identity and the self in his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Equally, plights of 'diasporic' communities resulting from the post-colonial condition are emphasized. The study uses a close study of the novel to unravel these issues, selecting and commenting on crucial passages.

In a comprehensive statement, Rebecca Godlasky tries to summarise the fate of Kureishi's characters when she argues that:

Hanif Kureishi's characters are never quite sure who they are. Caught between the often conflicting cultures of Britain and Asia, they seem to suffer from the problem that many second-generation British Asians face—they lack a definite identity. Kureishi's work, like Salman Rushdie's, explores the themes of identity and belonging in multi-cultural Britain (2005, 83).

The questions of identity and cultural belonging are stressed from the outset for they are so present at such a multicultural space of London, resulting from the previous history of British Empire and globalised culture. In the novel, not only the young, narrator-protagonist Karim Amir, but also his father Haroon and his 'uncle' Anwar undergo such a process; they suffer from a certain crisis of identity finding and belonging. The old as well as the young generations find themselves in that quest of identifying. Are they English or British? Or English Indians/Pakistanis? These questions are troubling for

them. Moreover, R. Godlasky points out that, building on an argument of Frederick M. Holmes, Like Salman Rushdie, Kureishi copes with “the plight of the migrant denied a unitary identity because he is shunted back and forth between two cultures (each of which is itself internally divided and subdivided) and invited to adopt a variety of sometimes contradictory subject positions” (2005, 83-84). This article primarily argues that Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) depicts vividly how confined minorities in metropolitan London suburbs provide a complex example of postcolonial *malaise*. Karim, the narrator-protagonist, located in the postcolonial dilemma of neither–nor predicament, of here and there, belonging and not, is aware of being “a new bred” and this very state of ‘new consciousness’ establishes inherently such contradiction and ambivalence in ‘identitary’ and cultural identifications or affiliations which investigate the very notions of authenticity, purity and essentialism.

Discussed also is his state of self-awareness and reflection on his new imposed position in the new milieu. It would be hasty to argue that the inherent complexities and intricacy in the textual fabric and thematic substance of the narrative speak for themselves so far as the paradoxes distinguishing the postcolonial discourse, condition and era are concerned. As a wanderer *itinerant*, as he calls himself, Karim keeps changing and moving between views, positions, and experiences. This makes the attempt to fix and locate him quite a hard task and this is betrayed at the plot level as well.

The study argues that Kureishi questions strictness and identity fetishism that are based upon a closed and inflexible identity politics. This is carried out through the two cases of Haroon and Anwar’s returns to an ‘imagined homeland’ and Indian traditions. Light is also shed on Karim’s identity and alienation as he discovers himself suspended, so to speak, between two antagonistic cultural traditions, two visions and worldviews. Through the use of satire, Kureishi also criticises ideological, Orientalist stereotypes built upon racial bias and discrimination. There is also the attempt of Kureishi to debunk the disparaging stereotyping often recurring in some ‘western’¹ discourses about threatening immigrants and aliens and this is carried out through ridiculing the ‘Orientalist’ Jeremy Shadwell, the strict-minded stage director, with whom Karim has to re-stage the suggestive play about Mowgli (*The Jungle Book*).²

The study unravels crucial instances of identity fetishism that Kureishi seems to critique, namely of Anwar in his stubborn manners and practices. Then, it

explores some satirized ethnocentric practices of the English that would be dismantled thus paving the way for more negotiation and dialogue. Lastly, the study highlights that negotiation and interaction with others empower Karim to feel an emaciated and dismissed part of his identity that is meant to be contained and subverted. In the final section of the article, I draw some conclusions that come out from the discussion. Before embarking on such task however, the ensuing section provides a short synopsis and reflection on the narrative.

II. SYNOPSIS AND REFLECTION

The Buddha of Suburbia seems to stand as a familiar story which keeps surfacing and re-appearing in many literary works written in English language in the 1990s. It unfolds the story of a young character called Karim Amir, who recounts the (hi-)story of his growing up living in South London suburbs. It should be revealed from the outset that the novel is equally semi-autobiographical as it expresses some of the events and concerns lived by Kureishi himself. It depicts Karim as a postcolonial wanderer caught in a “weird depression” in the suburbs exposing his attempts to move to a rightful space of central London and all the racism and its colonial residues and problems he encounters during his quest. Because “our world [the suburbs] seems so immutable” (*The Buddha*, 83) Karim looks forward to be somewhere else.

From football to music, from cinema to social relations and classes, and from books/novels to love-affairs, the narrator-character seems to develop viewpoints and criticism dramatically and vividly depicting meticulously the British social life of the 1960s. He states it openly saying that “it would be years before I could get away to the city, London, where life was bottomless in its temptations” (*The Buddha*, 8). Thus, movement entails encountering other people and this in itself exposes social conflicts and images of otherness; Karim puts it clearly that “Our suburbs were a leaving place, the start of a life” (*The Buddha*, 117). This is the message and quest that Karim endeavors to convince the reader of and follow. As stated by Ryan Trimm in his chapter in the book *Hanif Kureishi* (2015), *The Buddha of Suburbia* inaugurates

A new line of fiction: postimperial metropolitan novels revolving around suburban characters who navigate a contingent and uneasy path through a Britain of fast- changing politics and demographics. The suburbs here revise the traditional relation of country to city with the pastoral signifying the national, the urban the modern and cosmopolitan. The suburbs in contrast are an in-between space (2015, 52).

Hence, ‘metropolitan’ novels depict the ‘realities’ and challenge the narratives that have thrived

¹ Fully aware of the complexities and hard task of achieving a convincing definition of the ‘West’ or ‘western’ this article uses it simply as a short hand.

² To fully explore this issue in American context, one should consult Said’s later essays and interviews and Steven Salaita’s books (*Anti-Arab Racism in the USA: Where it Comes From and What it Means for Politics* 2006) in this regard.

in what was once called the center of the world. There are telling moments and passages in which Karim and other characters collectively articulate their ambivalent views and attitudes when confronted with issues of cultural affiliation and identity. Therefore, how these minor voices perceive their positions in a milieu such as London suburbs and equally how they react to discourses that aim to fix and marginalize them is crucial.

The second part of the narrative, however, seems to be devoted to Karim's career as an 'amateur' and 'stupid' actor; much of it covers meticulous scenes of rehearsals, stages and theatres, and how actors and minorities appear to live in their tension and anxiety. It is about "fellow Indian[s] in the foyer of a white theatre!" (1990, 231). In an important statement, one reads how the novel depicts "England with its unemployment, strikes, and class antagonism" (1990, 247).

III. CRITICISM OF IDENTITY FETISHISM

In the current violent context of today's world, no 'wise' observer can deny the fact that we are still living in an instable reality of the world in which the metropolitan centres still focus on discourses of sameness, unity and common heritage. In other words, they still stress homogeneity in a changing world discernible by the influence of postmodernism. Therefore, one thinks that Kureishi starts from this very idea of a shifting world, through the novel at least, to challenge the firm and strict norms and standards of a gone time when one clings to the nation-state and identity politics based upon geographical, linguistic and common cultural heritage. In a nutshell, Kureishi is critical of the non-elasticity of cultures in a shifting modernized space such as Britain.

Not only does the novel spotlight matters related to the 'clashes' between the white British and Indo-Pakistani immigrants, but also sheds light on the modern values daring the old-fashioned ones. Kureishi's mocking of this fetishism is elucidated when Anwar keeps nudging his daughter Jamila towards conforming to the Indian traditional habit of choosing a husband; Anwar endeavours to oblige her to accept the selected husband he has chosen with his brother in India. This issue is well elaborated in the following citation, as we read the dialogue between Uncle Anwar and Karim the mocking child:

I won't eat. I will die. If Ghandi could shove out the English from India by not eating, I can get my family to obey me exactly the same.' ... 'What do you want her to do?' [asks Karim]... 'to marry the boy I have selected with my brother.' ... 'But it's old-fashioned, Uncle, out of date,' I explained. 'No one does that kind of thing now. They just marry the person they're into, if they bother to get married at all...' "That's not our way, boy. Our

way is firm. She must do what I say or I will die. She will kill me" (1990, 60).

Therefore, as the quote shows, Kureishi questions and critiques the post-independence conservative politics that encourages resistance to change through cultural and 'identity' fetishism in favour of authenticity and specificity. 'Our way' here implies or presupposes a 'their way' which is not welcomed and negated. This cultural practice can function naturally in the (conservative) Indian milieu whereas it may not in a foreign one, beyond its frontier. 'That's not our way' depicts precisely this particularity. However, Karim is also critical of English stagnancy and manners that hinder the development of Indians and Asians in general. Subsequently, Jamila's primary refusal of the marriage stands for restriction of free liberal Britain. Still, Karim's statement, 'but it's old-fashioned, Uncle, out of date,' implies the stagnancy and inflexibility of Indian traditions, embodied by the obdurate Anwar, in a new liberal milieu. It denotes that it is no longer functional and suitable; there is a new look. Of course, it can also be read in a quite different mode. The idea is that Ghandi belongs to a gone epoch when his positions were meant to expel the British and decolonize the nation. Both readings, however, lead to the same conclusion. Anwar's hunger strike is his tool to force his daughter; Kureishi draws tellingly on the culture and characters of his country of origin since he is the child of a first-generation immigrant.

While during colonisation, as Robert Young argues, fixity of identity has been reinforced to remain different from the different 'Other,' it seems now that "what has happened is that the hierarchy has now been reversed" (1995, 4). Put otherwise, as a postcolonial figure, once colonised and experienced the traumas of the British oppression, Anwar appears to be sticking to his identity of origin, in an attempt neither to be contaminated nor contained by the majority British culture. For Robert Young, "fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change. Despite these differences, the fundamental model has not altered: fixity implies disparateness; multiplicity must be set against at least a national singularity to have any meaning" (1995, 4). Anwar's very sense of *disruption* and subsequent *change* leads him to stick to his identity and old manners. R. Young also adds that "in each case identity is self-consciously articulated through setting one term against the other" (4) leading to that reversal. Anwar appears to fear the seduction of the metropolitan context and culture which he sees as threatening to his own identity and culture and thus returns to an *imagined India* that he thinks would help him remain intact and secure.

Writing from a 'minority' position, Kureishi questions the rigid, strict intolerant identity politics that deprives people of freedom, of interacting openly with one another and of new relations making. Here, Jamila's

primary refusal of the selected husband, Changez, is a good example. (Even this chosen proper name implies 'change' and 'metamorphosis'). Hence, writing for Kureishi is not only meant as an act of aesthetic self-expression, but also as performance of collectivism. In a word, Jago Morrison in *Contemporary Fiction* states that Kureishi himself has claimed that "the cultural diversity of modern society implies new ways of thinking about both national and personal identity" (2003, 62).

Likewise, Kureishi calls for a new conception of 'Britishness' that is based upon 'inclusivity' and 'plurality' rather than a limited and narrow perception of the reality of a milieu.³ The example of the arranged marriage is the tradition in many cultures and contexts until something else, an alternative is presented depending largely on the milieu of performance. Furthermore, Anwar is portrayed as stubborn and obdurate in his ways. He is not ready to get rid of his outdated manners. His stubbornness results in an unhappy marriage for his daughter and sorrowfulness for himself, which is a wrath that leads to his own demise and death. Indeed, Kureishi criticizes the old unchangeable customs in a milieu where people should deal with the rhythm of modernity. He does this in an allegorical manner by using satire, wit and humour. As stated by the editors of *Key Concepts*, perhaps this position as a "radical and nationalist political strategy does not mean that [exilic voices] did not suffer a form of profound exile. Such conditions of localized alienation or exile could sometimes contribute to the generation of new social and cultural practices and the questioning of old traditions" (1998, 94). One might suggest that this is what Kureishi is doing; he is questioning both traditions. Moreover, the editors of *Key Concepts* argue that "the development of diasporic cultures necessarily questions essentialist models, interrogating the ideology of a united, 'natural' cultural norm, one that underpins the centre/margin model of colonialist discourse" and that quite recently "the notion of a 'Diasporic identity' has been adopted by many writers as a positive affirmation of their hybridity" (1998, 94). Karim's hybridity is obvious since he is the offspring of a marriage between the English Eva and the indo-Pakistani Haroon.

Since satire is invoked, attention is deployed to scrutinise some recurrent stereotypical representations of minorities, namely those against Haroon and his son Karim. This is carried out by the majority culture in an attempt to mould and hence fix their images and strategically contain them to fit in a certain model maintained by the dominated group or culture. The novel

is a satirical document that ridicules many social and cultural practices that characterise the relationship between the imperial divide. As for satire, it is better to consider R. J. Rees's definition which reads:

Nearly everyone is a satirist in a small way: the schoolboy who writes rude words about his teacher; the comedian on television who does a life-like imitation of the prime minister; even you and me, sitting in the pub or coffee bar complaining about the wickedness of the world and the foolishness of our leaders. The real satirist differs from most of us, both in the strength of his feeling and in having the wit and genius to express it in novel or poem or play. He must have some of the qualities of the moralist or the preacher, and some of the qualities of the clown- because the best way of attacking wickedness and foolishness is by laughing at them (1973, 50).

Hence, everyone is a satirist in one guise or another, but the skilful satirist is distinguished by the degree of his/her feelings and the influence of those expressions. To employ humour and ridiculousness is the best way to harass wickedness and foolishness of the world. This is exactly what Kureishi seems to be doing. Although Karim Amir seems to be open to both cultures and receives their idiosyncrasies, he is still racially discriminated by some 'English subjects.' He is rejected as a 'black/brown' Indian to engage in a relationship, love-affair with Helen as a 'white' British citizen whom he encounters at Eva's party. Accordingly, this act signifies that race-based thinking is still prevalent among some and that the 'demons' of racial line have not yet been exorcized; he is denied free interaction with society members which reflects traditional representation of 'Otherness' by which the Indian is still distanced, rejected and segregated on the basis of colour line.

Kureishi therefore mocks the so-called liberalism and granted equality (or pluralism) that England as a receiving space has been claiming. In this regard, the representation is still patterned upon and affected by social class and status considerations "where lives are measured by money", one reads in *The Buddha* (1990, 42). Over and above, this overall systematic categorization is highly elaborated in the following 'dialogue' between 'Hairy Back,' who is Helen's father, and Karim as he is cast away, as we read:

'You can't see my daughter again,' said Hairy Back. 'She doesn't go out with boys. Or with wogs.'
'Oh well.'
'Got it?'
'Yeah,' I said sullenly.
'We don't want you blackies coming to the house.'

³ In Morrison's *Contemporary Fiction* (2003) one reads: "As Hanif Kureishi suggests, the cultural diversity of modern society –in every sense– means that new ways of thinking are required about both national and personal identity. For him, likewise, a new concept of Britishness is needed based on inclusivity and plurality rather than parochialism and nostalgia. His work can be read as part of that project of deconstruction and, perhaps, rebuilding" (62).

'Have there been many?'
 'Many what, you little coon?'
 'Blackies.'
 'Where?'
 'Coming to the house.'
 'We don't like it... However many niggers there are, we don't like it. We're with Enoch. If you put one of your black 'ands near mu daughter I'll smash it with a 'ammer!' With a 'ammer!'" (1990, 40).

Accordingly, through the use of offensive terms 'wogs,' 'blackies,' 'coon' and many others that point towards offensiveness and even racism, the novel tries to depict the 'reality' of everyday life within the British society. As stated, Kureishi does make use of humour and satire as literary, artistic devices to tease and ridicule certain types of people, beliefs and practices. Hence, he tries to alter the audience's attitude and approach to these strangers. This is perhaps the burden of literature and writing in dismantling this discourse from within. The employment of English language and novel form, using satire, is radical in 'writing back to the Empire' as the famous moto/title goes. This implies that there are other histories, peoples, and experiences besides the ones previously asserted.

Moreover, what is also characteristic is the presence of the pronoun 'We' in ironic contrast with Anwar's formulation 'Our way;' this corresponds to, from a standpoint, a collectivity of action. 'We' negates 'our way' which affirmatively deepens difference. On the same page, there is also the symbolic presence of the *fence*; two connotations could be developed here. As for the first, the fence symbolizes a barrier which denotes that identities are located for once and fixed; so that no crossing of the border is legitimate, lawful or genuine without some regulation. Thus, it highlights a "consolidated vision" for those who live in the inside as opposed to those outside. (This is Edward Said's argument when viewing the connected vision in expanding and maintaining the Empire as non-conflictual, in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994)). So far as the second is concerned, the fence stands for restriction of the alien intruder, a consolidation of the internal frontier with "a Great fucking Dane" as guardian (1990, 227).

Karim, in his adventures and interactions, comes across scenarios of racism and violence; it is indeed part of his, and by implication Britain's, daily life, with Hairy Back, Shadwell, his schoolmates, and teachers. Though Karim, like his father, exhibits some readiness to act and behave as Englishmen require and expect, he is not fully welcome; he feels outcast and rejected. The change of perspective and attitude on the part of these minor figures derives from the stagnant behaviour of the English. In his own words, Karim affirms this opinion when saying that "Yeah, sometimes we were French, Jammie [Jamila] and I, and other times we went black American. The thing

was, we were supposed to be English, but to the English we were always wogs and nigs and Pakis and the rest of it." (1990, 53).

Although there is fluidity and fluctuation in Jamila and Karim's identifications from French to black American, they are demarcated in the eyes of the English; in this light, James Procter writes that Karim "shuttles between identities, positions and politics without even firmly committing or attaching himself to any" (2003, 154). This is why Karim is curious about his father's changed attitudes, for Haroon had "spent years trying to be more of an Englishman, to be less risibly conspicuous, *and now he was putting it back in spadeloads. Why*" (1990, 21; emphasis added).

Throughout the novel, Haroon spends most of his life meeting the expectations of the English, without being rewarded or given his due; he will not be promoted while there is a white man left on earth, despite working as a clerk in the Civil Service for years with that meagre salary of three pounds a week. Even though he feels comfortable and free in his Buddhist sessions, he is subject to sweeping stereotypes as magician, exotic, and authentic Indian. This reminds one of the telling idea in Said's *Orientalism* (1978) that the 'Orient' has always been viewed as an exotic, mysterious and erotic space full of wanders. When Karim and his 'girlfriend' Helen were at the airport with Jeeta, Anwar's wife, and Jamila to welcome Changez to England, he has the privilege to revenge; Karim states the following in *The Buddha*:

This was a delicious moment of revenge for me, because the rover [car] belonged to Helen's dad, Hairy Back. Had he known that four Pakis were resting their dark arses on his deep leather seats, ready to be driven by his daughter, who had recently been fucked by one of them, he wouldn't have been a contented man (1990, 78).

Making love to Helen and be driven by her is such a reward and means of retribution for him; sex as a tool of revenge might be highlighted here. (Karim's sexual case, perhaps tentatively, echoes that of Mustapha's in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*; in this case, sex is allegedly used as a means of writing back to the Empire). Another instance of racial bias is when Haroon is performing the 'yoga training' at Eva's house. However, while Haroon is welcomed by some, he is stereotyped by others. His case signifies the harsh treatment that immigrants can be exposed to. They might be frequent targets of stereotyping and racial jokes which hinder any possible communication between two worlds and cultures, East and West, past and present. Race, both as a barring line and social construction, is a silent 'essential marker' by which others are judged and simultaneously alienated. As we read in the ensuing conversation between two English men who attend the demonstration, the idea becomes apparent. The conversation reads thus:

The man said in a loud whisper to his friend, “why has *our* Eva brought this *brown Indian* here? Aren’t we going to get pissed?”

“He’s going to give us a demonstration of the *mystic arts!*”

“And has he got his *camel* parked outside!?”

“No, he came on a *magic carpet...*”

[Karim says] I gave the man a sharp kick in the kidney (1990, 12).

Therefore, how can one imagine the resilience of aged stereotypical representations of centuries ago in a plural present? This speaks volumes of engraved authentic Orientalist enterprise. Denied the right to exist in harmony with British subjects and co-exist with them, Karim reveals these recurring images and creates through literature, instead, a textual community, one where co-existence is potential. Definitely writing from the margin, Kureishi’s novel of dislocation and displacement shapes a postcolonial ethos that seeks, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s own terms, “to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (1986, 17). It is the role of minor literature to do so. In this line of thought, *The Buddha of Suburbia* succeeds in debunking the unkind ‘realities’ of first and second generation immigrants confronting the metropolis.

Uncle Anwar in fact sees that Haroon ‘has been seduced by the West,’ namely through Eva’s sophistication and manners. However, one point is unambiguous about them: they are both successfully assimilated into the British culture. In a very deep sense, the very death of Uncle Anwar and hence his being buried is highly meaningful and symbolic. Both meaningful and symbolic in the sense that he *represents* cultural resistance to ideological, cultural seduction, as not being dissolved in and absorbed by English manners, and indignation of the ‘immoral world and lack of respect of the ‘Other’ when being different in culture, race and attitudes. Once he is buried, a whole tradition and resistance are obscured too.

While alive, he is put between the devil and the deep blue sea: he either dismisses his ‘passive resistance’ sacrificing cultural heritage and then becomes assimilated, or he lives attached to his cultural origins, yet tormented— haunted by images of the past and heavy longing to go back to an imagined India— and finally dies as an alien. He has got to choose between civilisation and liberalism and thus live as estranged, or to remain faithful to one’s identity segregated. In the

story, one usually meets him alone either organizing his shop stock peering into his precious pictures and memories of India or coming out of the mosque helping himself with a stick.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kureishi’s novel obviously questions identity fetishism of both the British and the Indian characters. Being or indeed becoming ‘native’ in this metropolitan space, Karim Amir as well as other characters keep fluctuating between stances and identities because of their hybridity and because of their consciousness of the constraints imposed by social and cultural norms. Kureishi is also critical of disparaging stereotyping of ‘exotic’ and alien ‘Others’ being either Indian people coming from India/Pakistan or other immigrants residing in this context. Thus, the novel is a stinging satire on English identity politics and immigrants’ stances in the aftermath of the 1960s.

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