

Racial Struggle, Cultural Alienation and Sexual Conflicts in Hanif Kureishi's *the Buddha of Suburbia*

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to explore race, cultural alienation and sexual conflicts in Hanif Kureishi's novel The Buddha of Suburbia. How does Kureishi draw a hard line of race and class that separates the immigrants as "others"? How does his childhood experience affect his own psychology which helps him to depict the mindset of the immigrants? This research paper reflects the problems of migrants undergo when they have to get along with a completely different culture.*

Key Words: *Race, Class, Subjectivity, Ambivalence, Hybridity, Cultural Hybridity, Identity, Diaspora, Racism, Migration.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

In this age of globalization, the terms like transnationals, diasporas, expatriates, migrants, etc. have become very common phenomena and the difference between them is often blurred. A striking feature in this age of globalization is the "transnational movement of people" and the "...intensification in the creation of diverse diaspora populations in many locations, who are engaged in complex interpersonal and intercultural relationships with both their host societies and their societies of origin" (Tambiah, 163). Multicultural societies have emerged from diverse migration waves of people, frequently related to the colonialist expansion of empires. The conquest of new lands, that generally implied the imposition of the colonizer's culture, provoked cross-cultural exchanges.

The third space rejects the binary opposition of cultures and also rejects the belief that the origin of culture is race and ethnicity. The 'third space' is a new hybrid containing the dual heritage of both the cultures that went into its formation. Furthermore, Kureishi's 'literature' is marked with a personal reinstatement of race, ethnicity, class, language and expression, self-introspection, history, gender discourses, sexuality and a desire to be culturally relevant without taking recourse to oriental 'exoticism'. The aim of this research paper is to reflect the concept of cultural hybridity and the identity conflicts that many migrants and diasporas encounter. Specifically, it has analyzed these aspects in Hanif Kureishi's novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* in which we can see the result of the multiple migrations to the United Kingdom: the mixture of cultures and the problems of belonging derived from this multicultural environment. This work of fiction reflects on how the discriminatory, marginalizing, and racist attitudes faced by first generation immigrants and their second-generation representatives in the postwar British society have problematized the concept of multiculturalism.

Hanif Kureishi was born in England in 1954 to an Indian father and English mother. He was brought up as an Englishman and did not remember his non-English origin unless he was reminded by racist hostility. He suffered discrimination reinforced by government policies and feels disgusted as he contemplates policies applied to immigrants in the 1960s. His father, who had originally migrated from India to Pakistan, had moved to Britain to study law, but instead married an English woman, and settled down into a disgruntled life. Hanif Kureishi is a second generation immigrant Englishman born of an English mother and Indian-Pakistani-Muslim father. His works mirror the condition of Britain of the last three four decades which is marked by rapid and radical socio-cultural changes. His main works are *The King and Me* (1980) and *Outskirts* (1981) to *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), *The Black Album* (1995), *My Son the Fanatic* (1998) and *The Last Word* (2014).

The Buddha of Suburbia (1990), primarily follows the coming of age of Karim Amir, a British Indian teenager, in 1970s Britain. Despite Kureishi attempts to show that there is no stable identity disagreeing with Thatcher's understanding of Britishness. Although Karim was similarly a hybrid race at the beginning of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, he first emphasizes that he is British:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (3)

Karim is neither British nor Indian. In fact, Karim is too brown to be British and cultural legacy which comes from his father keeps him from being British. Despite everything, he cannot be said to be Indian because he has never been to India and he also learned the history of India from British books.

London, the big city, offers the opportunity to negotiate one's identity. When different cultures coincide in the same place, two situations could happen: a cultural assimilation, where the previously existing culture is assimilated by the others, or multiculturalism, where different cultures live separately in a place.

There are characters with hybrid qualities, identity crisis, racial problem, immigrant situation in the novel. They tend to use mimicry to find their identities and establish themselves in the cultures they live. The following words between Haroon and Anwar, one day, about why it would be difficult for them to rise in the society they migrated to, are important, "The whites will never promote us,' Dad said. 'Not an Indian while there is a white man left on the earth. You don't have to deal with them - they still think they have an Empire when they don't have two pennies to rub together" (27).

Karim's identity problem has more cynical results when he goes to the USA to perform the play. This time, instead of the Indian heritage, his Britishness stands out. He feels alienation in the USA, but his step brother Charlie, who is British, acts like an American, not an Englishman, adapts to America immediately and even criticizes Karim:

"Sit down, Karim, for God's sake," said Charlie. "Stop farting about. You're not in Beckenham now."

"I know that."

"Well then, can't you stop standing there and looking so English?"

"What d'you mean, English?"

"So shocked, so self-righteous and moral, so loveless and incapable of dancing. They are narrow, the English. It is a kingdom of Prejudice over there. Don't be like it!" (254)

Karim's bisexuality, his going between making love and fantasizing men and women can also be seen as a significant sign of his hybridity. He cannot decide which part he likes the most. He is actually happy with either sex, as he is content with being half English half Indian. He opts for whatever suits him at a particular moment. Here is how he is comfortable with his bisexuality:

I was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls. I liked strong bodies and the backs of boys' necks. I liked being handled by men... But I liked cunts and breasts, all of women's softness, long smooth legs and the way women dressed. I felt it would be heart breaking to have to choose one or the other... When I did think about it I considered myself lucky that I could go to parties and go home with anyone from the either sex... (55)

In this novel, parents struggle to accept the hybrid life of their children, raised in between two cultures, but sometimes they try to impose one culture over the other, such as Anwar, who does it by arranging a marriage for his daughter Jamila.

Karim's sexual experiences can also be compared to his hybrid cultural origin. He is not sure whether he likes men or women "it was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls" (53). K Hanif Kureishi writes:

I don't know, really. I don't think it was to show it as a melting pot. It was really to show that one emerges out of childhood bisexual. When you're a kid, you feel so erotically attached to both men and women, boys and girls around you. Your sexuality is so undifferentiated then. I went to a boys' school, and the sexuality . . . it was hot there. It was just taken for granted that these boys all lived in the same kind of atmosphere. . . . Bisexuality is always something I've taken for granted, actually. (46)

Kureishi points out such disparity through characters of different classes. Eva, a social climber, envies the affluence and fame that Karim's girlfriend, Eleanor, grew up with, yet Eleanor wears clothing that codes "below" her social class:

I was misled by my ignorance of London into thinking my Eleanor was less middle class than she turned out to be. She dressed roughly, wearing a lot of scarves, lived in Notting Hill and—sometimes—talked with a Catford accent. My mother would have been appalled by Eleanor's clothes and manners, and her saying 'shit' and 'fuck' every ten seconds. This wouldn't have perturbed Eva: she would have been disappointed and perplexed by Eleanor's concealment of her social origins and the way she took her 'connections' for granted. Eva would have given much to edge her body into the houses Eleanor had played in as a child. (173)

Buddha of Suburbia offers us the quest for an imaginary homeland for the immigrants. Because they do not feel at home and safe, "I breathed more easily now he'd changed the subject. The best women always are/ he went on. 'But she didn't give you the book. She's trying to protect you from your destiny, which is to be a half- caste in England. That must be complicated for you to accept - belonging nowhere, wanted nowhere" (141).

Jamila is one of the main characters in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. She is however the most important female character as she has so much to say to the reader about the situation of the second generation female immigrants in England in the seventies. Karim gives us a physical description of her, “. . . she was small and thin with large brown eyes, a tiny nose and little wire glasses. Her hair was dark and long again. . . . She was forceful and enthusiastic, Jamila. She always seemed to be leaning forward, arguing, persuading. She had a dark moustache, too, which for a long time was more impressive than my own” (53). Having read so much and with a head full of ideas ahead of her time, let alone the ideas of an ageing Muslim Indian immigrant for a father, Jamila suffers greatly.

Karim Amir, the protagonist of Kureishi's debut novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, internalizes in himself this impulse of change and shifting identification which is always on the move as Stefano Manferlotti beautifully put it: “a whole body that now rests and now runs, now flourishes and now decays, smiles and bleeds” (193). However, simply being born a racially hybrid does not make one necessarily a culturally hybrid. It is rather a matter of choice and learning the culture of both the traditions, one which is a living reality and the other inherited from either one or both the parents. When Haroon objects to Karim's homosexual behaviour with Charlie, Karim sarcastically alludes to his father having sex with Eva in her garden: “Relax Dad. Relax your whole body from your fingers to your toes and send your mind to a quiet garden where ...” (18). The Muslim immigrant can also be homosexual. Kureishi has shown this in his novel. Karim is a bisexual. Jamila becomes lesbian. Mustaq is gay.

However, Karim later learns that because of his roots and skin color, he will never be considered a true Englishman. However, Karim is neither British nor Indian. Interestingly, Karim has tried to cast aside his Indian self throughout his life but is now recruited for “eastern authenticity.”

“Wasn't I good, eh, Mum?”

“You weren't in loin-cloth as usual,” she said. ‘At least they let you wear your own clothes. But you're not an Indian. You've never been to India. You'd get diarrhea the minute you stepped of that plane, I know you would.’

“Why don't you say it a bit louder,” I said. ‘Aren't I part Indian?’

“What about me?” Mum said. “Who gave birth to you? You're an Englishman, I'm glad to say”. (232)

Yet even as Kureishi highlights the complexity of cultural values through the eyes of a second-generation Englishman, he notes that the tensions in value formation between individual and society remain tenuous, particularly when these values appear at odds. Kureishi refers back to more traditional novels of manners when he invokes Karim's set of values and its opposition to the social moral codes of England in the 1970s. In an argument about cultural representation and artistic license, Karim protests, “No. Truth has a higher value” (181). Here, the appearance Karim maintains and the conformity he wishes to adapt as an English man collide with his sense of self. This clash occurs in every novel of manners, for it displays the disparity between individual values and social codes. The crisis in this novel of manners occurs when Karim recognizes that his moral values have changed to accommodate social expectations, yet he finds no satisfaction in his conformity:

As I sat there I began to recognize that this was one of the first times in my life I'd been aware of having a moral dilemma. Before, I'd done exactly what I wanted; desire was my guide and I was inhibited by nothing but fear. But now, at the beginning of my twenties, something was growing in me. Just as my body had changed at puberty, now I was developing a sense of guilt, a sense not only of how I appeared to others, but of how I appeared to myself, especially in violating self-imposed prohibitions. (186)

Karim gets a nice wake-up call on his first day back in England from a South African dentist, presumably white but more of a foreigner than himself, who asks his nurse: “Does he speak English?”. Karim explains, “It was only later, when he came to England, that Dad realized how complicated practical life could be. He'd never cooked before, never washed up, never cleaned his own shoes or made a bed. Servants did that” (23).

This is why Karim is an odd mixture of continents of Europe and South Asia and blood of Indian and English. Karim mixture makes him a biological hybrid as well as a cultural one. So, Karim is both a biological and a cultural hybrid. Karim's identity crisis appears once again at Anwar's funeral, Karim regretted not being attached to his Indian roots anymore, “But I did feel, looking at these strange creatures now – the Indians – that in some ways these were my people, and that I'd spent my life denying or avoiding that fact. I felt ashamed and incomplete at the same time, as if half of me were missing, and as if I'd been colluding with my enemies, those whites who wanted Indians to be like them” (212).

Apart from his short relationship with Eleanor, all his sexual relationships have been about conquest, escape and instant gratification, and not love. It is clear that, over the course of the novel, Karim's sexual interest in both sexes is more than experimental, and this could be seen as an additional aspect that leads him to feel like an outsider. There is an expectation that Haroon's visual discovery of Karim's homosexual encounter with Charlie and his assertion that “being a man and denying your male sex was perverse and self-destructive” would develop as a valid storyline, especially as a generational inter-cultural clash.

Notably, Kureishi co-opts the old imperialist language of ‘race’ to talk about a different kind of transition within British culture, marked not in terms of skin colour but in terms of a rejection of conformism and consumerism: Charlie stirred restlessly as he leaned there. He hugged himself in self-pity as we took in this alien race dressed with an originality we’d never imagined possible. I began to understand what London meant and what class of outrage we had to deal with [...] When the shambolic group finally started up, the music was thrashed out. It was more aggressive than anything I’d heard since early Who. This was no peace and love; here there were no drum solos or effeminate synthesisers. Not a squeeze of anything ‘progressive’ or ‘experimental’ came from these pallid, vicious little council estate kids with hedgehog hair, howling about anarchy and hatred. (129–30)

Here and throughout the text, the culture shocks sustained by a particular city in a particular period are described with a vivid sense of immediacy. In the beginning of the book, Karim is very fascinated with the environment surrounding the middle class woman Eva. This fascination partly derives from Karim’s sexual and emotional interest in Eva’s son, Charlie. He tries to fit into Charlie’s world by copying his clothes, style and character. Linking this to the above-mentioned theories, as Karim is taking on Charlie’s personality features, he is mirroring himself in order to come closer to identifying his own personality and identity.

As a British teenager in the 1950s, the writer describes his reaction to this encounter with ‘race’ as one of self-aversion, “I was desperately embarrassed and afraid of being identified with these loathed aliens. I found it almost impossible to answer questions about where I came from. The word ‘Pakistani’ had been made into an insult. I was a word I didn’t want used about myself. I couldn’t tolerate being myself” (76).

Among Karim’s friends, Eva, Charlie, and Eleanor are typical of the people who can either function as his role models—Charlie, for example—or guide him into the high life of London. Karim’s homosexual love for Charlie, for example, is motivated by something deeper than the need for sex, “I admire him more than anyone but I didn’t wish him well. It was that I preferred him to me and wanted to be him. I coveted his talents, face, style [and probably skin color]. I wanted to wake up with them all transferred to me” (15).

Kureishi, like his narrator, also defends the freedom of the individual that has led to this barren wasteland. This is a philosophical flaw in the novel and one which becomes apparent as the novel ends. Kureishi thus presents the struggle of these immigrants living in an alien society who strive to resolve their crisis of otherness that is the result of being suspended between two positions – the native culture and the host culture.

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