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Rewriting the Space of Immigrant Diasporic Fiction in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*

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Abstract: Hanif Kureishi's novels have explored the space of multiethnicity in post-diaspora Britain's immigrant literature. By attempting to read the sense of hybridisation that a post-diasporic immigrant undergoes, Kureishi has consistently denied the relatively easier amalgam of the 'postcolonial' nomenclature. His debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) almost singlehandedly led to the advent of the contemporary generic strain of immigrant multiethnic literature that consists of such authors as Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. The present paper attempts to read into the biographical roots of Kureishi's novel as well as the thematic endorsements that he brings into his sense of Postcoloniality, hybridisation of cultures and multiethnicity in a postcolonial world. By introducing theoretical angularities from Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and others, the paper is an attempt to read the text contextually as well as with its historicity.

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi, multiculturalism, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, multiethnicity, diaspora, immigrant literature.

Diasporic literatures possess a distinctive interrogation of values that re-present identity, engaging “a vital cultural space, often within the same text, where a revolutionary rendering of the colonized nation is both forged and challenged, and where the political and cultural goals of anti-colonial nationalisms are both acknowledged and questioned” (McLeod 99). Hanif Kureishi’s literary oeuvre, intensely varied, presented in the context of immigrant authors in Britain, is decidedly magnificent, urbane-picturesque and substantially argumentative in its augmentation of a distinct space of migration. One of the most prolific litterateurs in the contemporary multi-ethnic scene, Kureishi has written plays, screenplays and novels besides his stint at directing, and in this process has produced some of the most iconic and representative literary and visual artefacts among the multitudinous creative writing originating from the second generation of the South Asian diaspora. Kureishi’s prolific output can be traced from such unorthodox plays and films as *The King and Me* (1980) and *Outskirts* (1981) to *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and onward to his prose fiction, his magnum opus being *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), *The Black Album* (1995), *My Son the Fanatic* (1998) and *The Last Word* (2014) from among his not-so-scant repertoire – works that have contributed significantly to mainstream perceptions of the mixed-race, multicultural British citizens following the postcolonial event of diaspora from the erstwhile colonies. Furthermore, Kureishi’s ‘literature’ is marked with a personal reinstatement of race, class, ethnicity, language and expression, history, self-introspection, gender discourses, sexuality and a desire to be culturally relevant without taking recourse to oriental ‘exoticism’. Kureishi has produced a definition of the postcolonial as almost ‘invariably cosmopolitan’ as Elleke Boehmer remarks:

It is a literature that is *necessarily* transplanted, displaced, multilingual, and, simultaneously, conversant with the cultural codes of the West: it is within Europe [...] though not fully *of* Europe [...] This has far-reaching implications for the way in which other kinds of—perhaps more specifically national or regional—postcolonial writing will be read in the future. (Boehmer 230)

Kureishi tries to interpret the neo-British multiculturalism from within and not always resort to obscure external or objective inspection. There has to be “a new way of being British after all this time”, writes Kureishi, the white British “have to learn that being British isn't what it was” (Kureishi 2002, 55). This reflects Stuart Hall's statement that plurisignifies the course of identity politics: “Cultural diversity is not something that is coming in from outside, it is also something that is going on inside, in relation to Britishness itself” (Hall 1999, 38). This integrative attempt is further offset by a Rushdie-esque or a Naipaul-esque attempt to search for his roots as Kureishi too is disillusioned in his desire to relocate to his ‘point of origin’—ironically completing the interpellation that circulates across diasporic sense and sensibility. Any attempt to interpret the flow that Kureishi inheres mandates a study of his fiction, his most personal presentations, almost autobiographical in expression and intent, and also his method of hybridizing the discourse that a previous generation of diaspora had granted him, would be incomplete in its reading unless collated with their portrayal in his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

Diasporic metaculturation and an author's becoming

One of the most curious aspects of Kureishi as a diasporic author is the fact that he had not experienced the essential movement of diaspora/migration. 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. Kureishi, as a youth in an often racist Bromley, found it difficult to remain inconspicuous due to his multiethnic origins—often victimised, but also expected to interact in a native patois instead of his British accent, and distanced racially despite his birth status as a British subject. It is often an offshoot of the colonial legacy that the early immigrants were treated with a commonplace disdain. The colonies in South Asia, chiefly an undivided India, were the colonial mainstays and the last glorious historical excursions for the British psychology:

In British minds, the Raj was something more than just a colony: it represented Britain's imperial destiny, a mirror in which the British could see a reflection of themselves

not as mere planter-settlers but as an imperial race, and the natural heirs to the great Mughals. (Mondal 147)

A natural effect of the loss of this colony was a post-colonial shaming for the purported 'ruling' class, and thus the subjective alienation of the immigrants, regardless of their birth status. Kureishi's father was often heckled by 'locals' who considered any person of 'colour' to be racial outcasts who attempt to trespass into an elite domain. A similar alienation was meted out to Kureishi during his formative years, leading to a dissociation of sensibilities—as a British subject he could not orient himself with the idea of a back-to-roots existence, and neither could he integrate into a definite British, Pakistani or South Asian-ness due to his multiethnic identity of a second generation immigrant. The creation of an identity commiserate with his particular condition is less of an evolution than static movement from one pseudo-serious placement to another similar location—the protagonists' "often painful growth towards maturity through a range of conflicts and dilemmas, social, sexual and political" (Moore-Gilbert 113) is a familiar construct for Kureishi in his attempts to identify a multiethnic locality of conflicting identities, and nowhere is it as well determined as in *The Buddha of Suburbia*.

In his essay "The Rainbow Sign" (1986) Kureishi discusses the issues of 'race' and ethnic identification in a particular way, describing his own troubling experience as a teenager, of 'passing' as a white fascist. Together with "a skinhead friend who later became the model for Johnny in *My Beautiful Laundrette*," he met with "racist lads down at the football ground, where they congregated to hunt down Pakistanis and beat them" (Kureishi 1996, 75). As a British teenager in the 1950s, the writer describes his reaction to this encounter with 'race' as one of self-abhorrence:

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. (Kureishi 1996, 76)

This distancing from the self in order to assimilate in a 'purer' way into the indigenous populace took a bitter turn with Kureishi's later literary appraisals. Indeed, "throughout his work there is a continual resistance to 'racial' separatism" (Morrison 182). The sense of separation, of being Other-ised and differed on the basis of racial identity contributed significantly to his fiction.

The multiethnicity with which Kureishi was endowed with also produced an acute political consciousness that strengthened his rubric, preparing the stage for his 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*. Although the allure of associating himself with the 'class' of diaspora authors was immense, Kureishi applied for a distinction that denied him the comfortable execution of the genre. Despite his 'Other' status, Kureishi maintained an ethical representative mode of interaction and representation. For Kureishi, each of the proffered alternatives of separatism or meek assimilation represents an equal failure to grasp the nettle of "a digested political commitment to a different kind of whole society" (Kureishi 1996, 95). Kureishi steadfastly believes that "a society that is racist is a society that cannot accept itself, that hates part of itself so deeply that it cannot see, does not want to see – because of its spiritual and political nullity and inanition – how much people have in common with each other" (Kureishi 1996, 95). Diaspora for Kureishi was not a phenomenon which he had experienced, but the racism of the 60s in Britain was an ontological interrogation for him. Whether he should embrace the Englishness with which he had already aligned himself or whether to sustain the postcolonial embankment by fuelling the 'white man's' stereotypes was a perpetual question for his identity.

The Buddha of Suburbia almost holistically determines Kureishi's narrative strategy which contains multiple points of access including the postnationalisation of postcolonialism and a suspicion of 'identity' politics. While Kureishi's identity is questioned, the 'self' of the nation is left out unquestioningly. Stuart Hall observes the insidious—and ostensibly multiculturalist—procedures whereby the convenient Othering and exoticisation of ethnicity merely confirms and stabilises the hegemonic notion of 'Englishness' (Gandhi 126). In these circumstances, ethnicity is always and already named as marginal or peripheral to the mainstream; by contrast, as Stuart Hall remarks,

“‘Englishness’ . . . is, of course, never represented as ethnicity” (Hall 1996, 447). The metropolitan constitution of ethnicity as a ‘lack’ is present ambivalently in Kureishi’s fiction, populating the sublimated discourses, never actually absent from the processes that fuel both his sporadic angst and compulsive creativity. However, this lack also leads critics such as Rey Chow and Gayatri Spivak to question and complicate the longing “once again for the pure Other of the West” (Spivak 8). Kureishi suffers from this anxiety of having lost his pure otherness as he is “contaminated by the West, dangerously un-Otherable” (Gandhi 127), and it is settled with his inexcusable “loss of the ancient non-Western civilisation, his beloved object” (Chow 12).

Contextualized with a marginal difference, Bronwyn T. Williams, discussing Kureishi’s generation of black British writers, describes their work in a manner which applies particularly to the literary identity politics of Kureishi as

... an attempt to disrupt the narrative forged to define the dominant culture, to hybridize the discourse, to reconfigure the concept of all cultural identities as fluid and heterogeneous. Instead of seeking recognition from the dominant culture or overcoming specific instances of political injustice [Kureishi’s work] endeavours to reconfigure these relations of dominance and resistance, to reposition both the dominant and the marginalized on the stage of cultural discourse, and to challenge static borders of national and cultural identity. (Williams 1999)

The question that arises from such a position of continued resistance is of the political ramifications—is Kureishi’s writing even remotely political in this context? If so, what are the measurements of this politics that Kureishi is either a part of or constitutes an individual whole of? Andrew Smith suggests: “what is absent is some sense of the *inertia* of cultural practices, shaped as they are by institutions and traditions that are the product of historical struggles, and of the entanglement of the cultural with the material, the concrete stuff of human consumption and survival” (Smith 253). Any culture cannot exist in isolation, it requires a history, especially in the instance of a

multiethnic, post-diasporic cultural discourse of which Kureishi is a part of, but is devoid of as well.

Due to the ambiguous status of a second-generation hybrid migrant, Kureishi can neither be angry or rebellious, neither can he compose a fiction of assimilation, as his re-territorialization has not been affected yet – he remains as the Other that he subconsciously perceives himself to be. With reference to similar diasporic contexts, Homi Bhabha suggests:

These moments of undecidability must not be seen merely as contradictions in the idea or ideology of empire. They do not effect a symptomatic repression of domination or desire that will eventually either be sublated or will endlessly circulate in the dereliction of an identificatory narrative. Such enunciations of culture's colonial difference are closer in spirit to what Foucault has sketchily, but suggestively, described as the material repeatability of the statement [...] meaning grasped not in relation to some un-said or polysemy, but in its production of an *authority to differentiate*. (Bhabha 2004, 186)

The differentiation is essentially affected between a selfsame identity of the second-generation, multiethnic immigrant that Kureishi is, and the 'dominant' class of racist British populace. And this Other-ation is found as the operative constituent in the majority of his works, especially so in the cited instances of *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*.

The Buddha of the Suburbia and Formation of Identity

Inspired by the success of *My Beautiful Laundrette* and motivated to give the British Pakistanis of his generation a distinctive articulation, Kureishi focused his imagination on fiction, producing his first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, in 1990. "I had always wanted to be a novelist," Kureishi had remarked, speaking with quiet passion of the part played by *The Buddha of Suburbia* in the making of multicultural

Britain. “If Britain is a cultural force in Europe—which I think it is—then that's because of multiculturalism and diversity,” he further states:

I'm proud to have seen that happen. Somehow, Bromley in the 50s and 60s did not boil over. It has been an extraordinary revolution when you think how class-ridden and deferential it used to be. Britain became a multicultural society by mistake. No one ever thought, ‘How do we make a multicultural society?’ (McCrum 2014)

The Buddha of Suburbia, following the seemingly colossal and continuing success of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, put Kureishi in a unique position—he was both a popular bestseller and critically acclaimed author, having made fertile connections between Bromley and Bombay, reconciling the one to the other. Within British cultural spheres, he was both an icon of multiculturalism and its persisting and obsessively acknowledged tick, especially to the rising generation of new Britons. Zadie Smith remembers her first reading of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, aged 15: “There was one copy going round our school like contraband. I read it in one sitting in the playground and missed all my classes. I'd never read a book about anyone remotely like me before” (Donadio 2008).

The Buddha of Suburbia, later adapted to a film, wittily satirizes both the English liberals and the immigrant Asians who trade in this newfound multiethnicity. “The child of an Indian father and English mother, Kureishi questions and subverts notions of fixed racial or sexual identity (his main protagonist, Karim, is bisexual), and writes from the perspective of someone who grew up in London in the 1960s” (Innes 187). The novel begins:

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, or here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (Kureishi 1990, 3)

That opening line recalls Homi Bhabha's description of the ways in which educated Indians were seen as "white but not quite," a desired for exoticism, but here it is the protagonist who identifies himself, partly in acknowledgement of how he is perceived by others, as "an Englishman born and bred, almost," (Kureishi 1990, 3) always becoming British but never quite being or obtaining the exact identity. But if his mixed race and sexuality fix certain parameters and contexts for his identity, they also allow him to construct and perform changing selves. Above all, they allow him—and the author—to cast a sardonic eye on the ways in which his father, Haroon, and others cater to and profit from certain stereotypes. These stereotypes are the staple ingredients of diasporic identity to a large extent, quantifying the migrancy as an experience that sets the individual apart from his present co-habitants.

Texts like *The Buddha of Suburbia* certainly do have a political content and are not shy of dealing with issues like sex, race or class antagonism. Centralising the narrative of a second-generation immigrant, whose thespian ambitions are meted with subtle disregard, and whose bisexual orientation is seemingly rebellious and expressive of an absent flux, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is a novel addressed to the mainstream, a comedy about music, fashion, teenage sexuality and the experience of growing up in the centre of London youth culture in the late 1970s (Morrison 182-83). In this sense, one of the novel's most striking features is the way in which it explores the birth of a new kind of metropolitan consciousness. 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 selfpity 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.” (Kureishi 1990, 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. Ethnic disjunctions are an important piece of the jigsaw, but certainly not the whole.

Rey Chow’s reading of the neo-Orientalist discourse of ‘endangered authenticities’ is also wonderfully corroborated in Kureishi’s novel, where we find the novel’s Anglo-Indian protagonist, in pursuit of acting filiations and aspirations, participates in an audition organised by the seedy theatre director Shadwell. In a plight similar to Kureishi’s own, Karim’s unregenerate South London accent belies Shadwell’s expectations of exoticism, prompting the discovery of the aspirant as a culturally impoverished and disappointingly British lad. And while Karim does land the part of Mowgli, Shadwell instructs him to work harder on his Indian accent and to smear himself with brown polish before appearing on stage. Ironically, Gayatri Spivak finds the postcolonial intellectual in a similar position to Kureishi’s Karim. Where the West once insisted on the illegitimacy of non-Western knowledges, now “we postcolonial intellectuals are told that we are *too* Western” (Spivak 8).

Kureishi narrates a tale of hybridity in his own terms, where the assimilation of the Self into the greater post-racial formation becomes impossible as the British look down upon the diasporic populace with colonisers’ sentiments. And in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Gene’s story, although the story of a lover of Karim’s coveted Eleanor becomes part of both Karim’s and Kureishi’s own:

Sweet Gene, her black lover, London's best mime, who emptied bed-pans in hospital soaps, killed himself because every day, by a look, a remark, an attitude, the English told him they hated him; they never let him forget they thought him a nigger, a slave, a lower being. And we pursued English roses as we pursued England; by possessing these prizes, this kindness and beauty, we stared defiantly into the eye of the Empire and all its self-regard [...] We became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it. (Kureishi 1990, 227)

Here the narrator presents an explanation of how the novel should be read—"the post-imperial challenge to Englishness, we are told, is both defiance and appropriation, an apposite formulation for the transitional nature of English postcolonial identity" (Head 222). Karim's identity is similarly transnational, in-between the states of an English being and a post-diasporic individualism that recognizes its self through experiences of a different hybridity. This neo-colonial hybridity is resonant with the capacitive extension of the idea that Bhabha emphasizes on as the "strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" (Bhabha 1995, 34). Karim Amir, with his imprecise multicultural origins, "born of an Indian father and an English mother" (Head 222), is liable for a similar hybridity of disavowal. While also comparative to pseudo-colonial progression narratives such as Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* nevertheless "simultaneously summons and rebuffs the *bildungsroman* with its typical equations between self and society" (Steven Connor, cited in Head 222). Connor evidently associates Kureishi's response to the question of this multicultural subjectivity as equivalent to a pre-existing British tradition while asserting his difference. However, Kureishi is not subjective to a historical literary formulation but instead produces a statement that percolates the question of identity together with issues of "class mobility and sexual discovery" as exemplified in such writers as Braine, Sillitoe and Drabble" (Head 222). This reactive potency of the neo-colonial, multicultural hybridity assisted by its oscillations between and against the form of the *bildungsroman* helps in the creation of a fluid identity,

transnational in its becomings, as Kureishi tends to move away from the interrogation of the post-diaspora experience that he initiated and instead tries to associate himself with issues more familiar to the 'local' culture.

As a summative assessment, *The Buddha of Suburbia* may be referred to as a comic novel, albeit dark or 'black' contextually, or in its overtones, but a comic venture in the likes of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* or Evelyn Waugh's *On the Road*. The aforementioned novels present a satirical view of Englishness that transcends its contemporary multicultural potential whereas Kureishi's work establishes a convention that acts as an evolution of the similar narrative strategy. In contrast with the 'self-authored farcical predicaments' of Jim Dixon in Amis' *Lucky Jim*, "Karim Amir's years of maturation are fashioned, unequivocally, by broader cultural forces; and where Dixon, the progenitor of the post-war provincial hero, happily turns his back on the provinces and heads for London, Amir's metropolitan experiences stage an enriching conflict between urban and suburban influences" (Head 223). The emergence of an enlightened, Renaissance-figure of the 'Buddha of suburbia' in the novel is shown not to be reliant on social accessories that are superficially established. Instead of a purely comic or farcical presentation of the emergence of the neo-colonially hybridized character of Karim Amir as the 'Buddha of Suburbia', "the new type of character that emerges is a fresh serio-comic figure, the embodiment of suburban multicultural identity" (Head 223).

Otherring the Author, Authoring the Other

Kureishi's hyper-cosmopolitanism presents a difficulty in categorisation, especially in view of his genre transgressions. Perhaps an extended survey would have necessitated the amalgamation of Kureishi's portfolio of plays and films as well, besides a purer autobiographical glimpse, showcasing the absence of diasporic affectations that have ensured a continued validity of his works. But Kureishi showcases the rubric of multicultural, multiethnic experience: Hybridity is not always a pleasant experience; "dual identities might be advantageous, but . . . it can also be disablingly schizophrenic" (Nayar 204). Kureishi is at times a victim and on others the perpetrator of this dualism, the dialectic of diaspora, and a continued hybridity that is a

construed disability. But the central discourse that runs parallel to his literary ethic is the factual constant of the signified momentum – the immigrant subject attempts to dislocate her-/himself from the ideology of the diaspora, but is continuously thwarted in those attempts. Kureishi's success is specifically in this context – he does not criminalize nationalism, nor does he display jingoism for his former, unattached origins, there is no hint of satire or ironical representation either. Hanif Kureishi writes for a personal form of expression, and that is precisely the post-diaspora identifier that makes a new Britain. His presentation of a multiethnic, post-diaspora Britain is effectively an assemblage:

One in which the Asian cultural scene works as a *metaphor*, and where material reality is established through details of shops, language and people, and a kind of 'home' space where vignettes of the original homeland are reproduced. It is not therefore the production of Asia but the re-production [...] a catachrestic wrenching out and placing into a new context. (Nayar 208)

In this context of re-placing the diasporic identity in a renewed order, the broad orientation of Kureishi's work seems to be increasingly geared towards occupying the liberal mainstream in British culture, arguing for a different medium of expression and integration. Indeed, in some of the later texts such as *Intimacy* (1998) and the collection *Midnight All Day* (1999), even issues of ethnicity are deeply submerged amongst other concerns, such as class identity, sexuality and desire, micro-politics and the local sphere. In the struggle against diaspora-writing, the strategy of Kureishi's writing "cannot be totalised in terms of the old opposition of separatism versus integration" (Morrison 190). To quote Jago Morrison, as a recapitulation of Kureishi's creative acumen, "his work can be thought of as a play for the imaginative centre ground" (Morrison 190), especially in the context of diaspora and its allied literary activities to which Kureishi lends a necessary hint of imagination, reacquiring the order of substantiative identity.

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